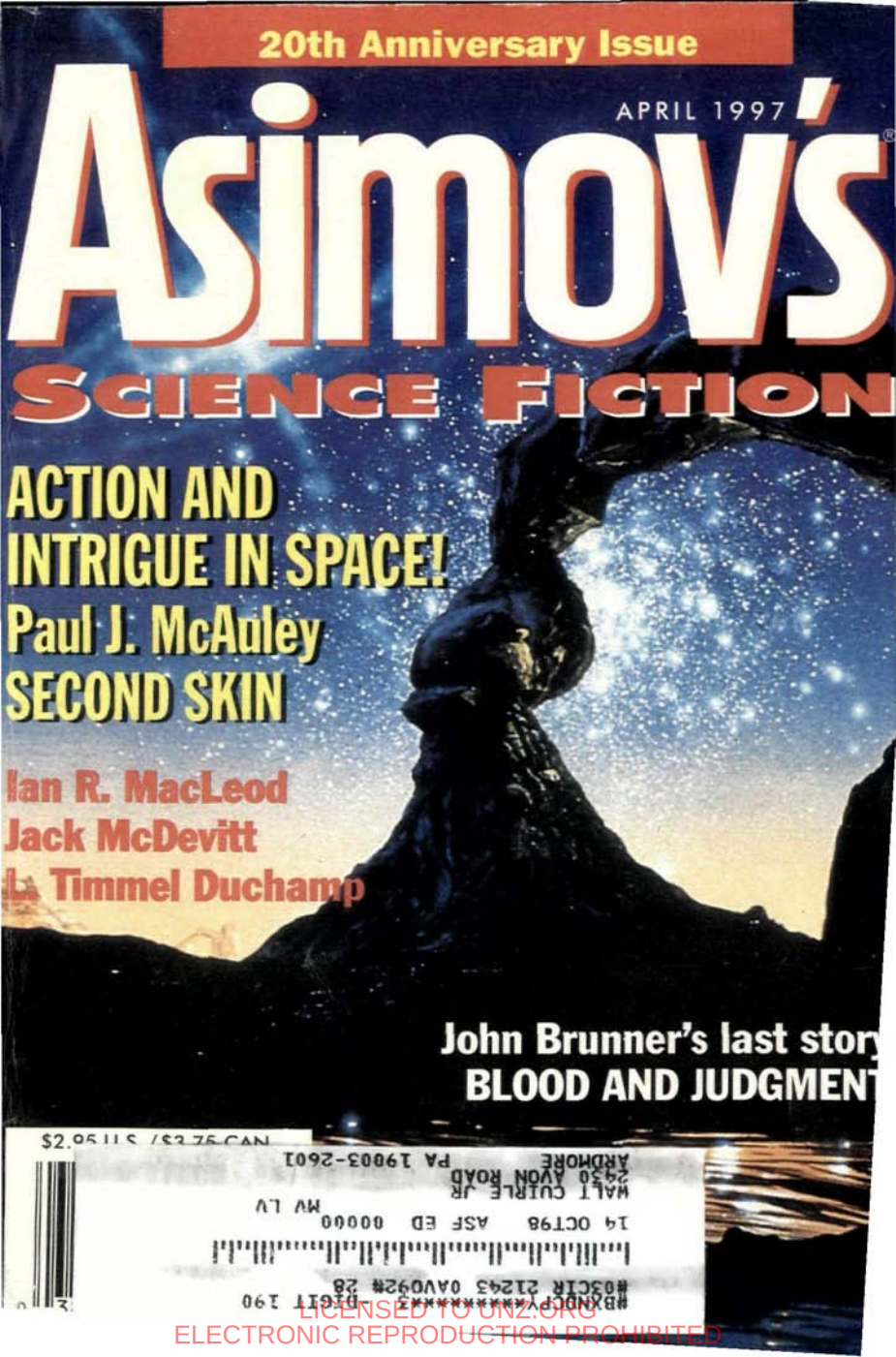

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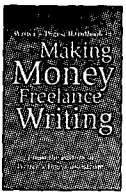

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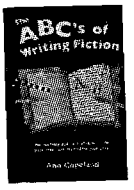

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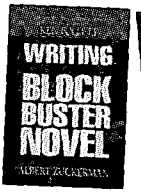

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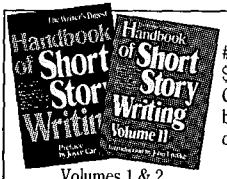

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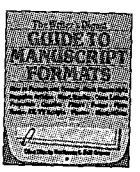

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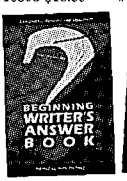

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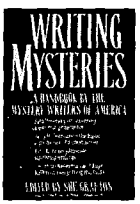

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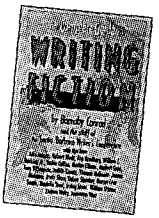

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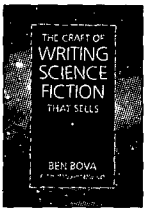

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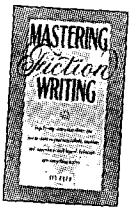

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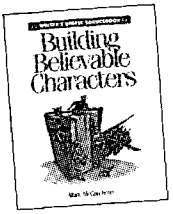

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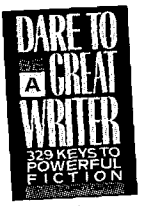

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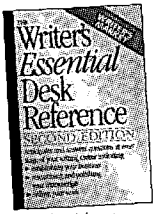

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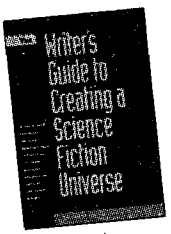

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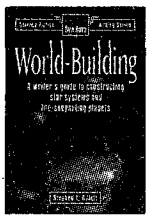

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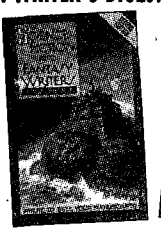
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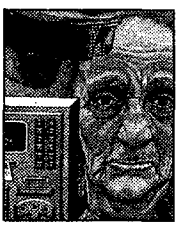

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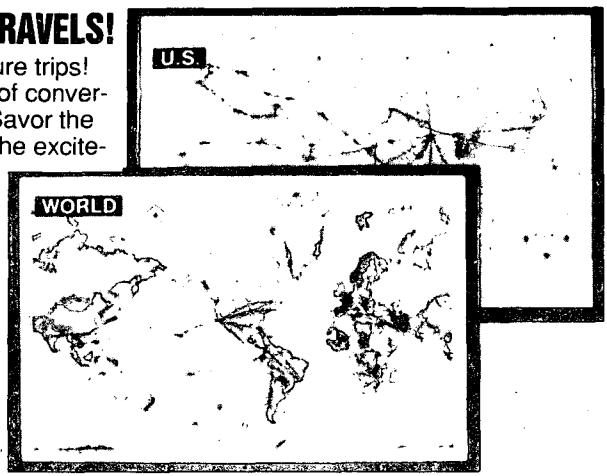

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

COMING ATTRACTIONS

As this dizzy century spirals toward its welcome close, the newest zone of kinkiness that has popped out among us involves cigarette smoking. So says my trusty informant on matters of social change, *The Wall Street Journal,* whose fearless reporters check up on all sorts of cutting-edge phenomena for me now that I am not really a cutting-edge kind of guy myself any more.

According to the *Journal,* a whole new genre of cigarette-porn movies has emerged in video-cassette form. "Smoxploitation films" is the generic term for these items. Typical of the form is the thirty-minute video called "Paula," in which a young blonde woman wearing a strapless gown and a black hat with a veil slinks into view, lights a cigarette from a candle, takes a deep drag or two, and blows some smoke rings. After a time she switches over to a cigarette holder, and smokes some more. That's it. She doesn't strip. She doesn't make lewd or suggestive remarks. She just stands there and smokes. Smokes provocatively, maybe; smokes voluptuously; but, still, all she does is *smoke.* If you want the privilege of watching Paula puff, it'll set you back $34.95. Apparently it's worth it, to those who find such things worthwhile. "She is a fabulous smoker," says the reviewer in *Smoke Signals,* a monthly newsletter that keeps watch over artistic endeavors of this sort. "As the video progresses, she does quite a few outstanding slow nose exhales."

Other torrid smoxploitation items reported on recently by *Smoke Signals,* which operates out of the hotbed of deviant social behavior that is Providence, Rhode Island, include "Smoky Kisses" (two women sharing a cigarette) and "The Two Sides of April" (drab unprepossessing girl bares her true seductive nature when she lights up). The actresses—many of whom aren't smokers in real life, and say that they get pretty glassy-eyed and green around the gills after a long grim day before the camera—are trained in such arcane technical skills as the "snap inhale," which requires them to release little bursts of smoke from their lips and then to gulp them down, and the "French inhale," in which they blow smoke out of their mouths and draw it simultaneously into their nostrils. "The exhale is very important," notes one smoxploitation-film expert.

The smoke-film aficionados who write for *Smoke Signals* also assay

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Hollywood movies for their nicotine content. A review of "Mad Love," starring Drew Barrymore, points out with displeasure that although Ms. Barrymore smokes throughout the movie, and "there are many deep inhales," the director doesn't bear down hard on the best moments of the smoking, and, besides, "the exhales aren't great."

The tone is very much like that to be found in those blurry little magazines that provide quick summaries of the high points of the latest pornographic films. But there's no pornography to be found in the smoxploitation genre—at least, not pornography of the old-fashioned kind that involved healthy young unclad folks enthusiastically Doing It before the camera. Nudity is utterly taboo in these movies. We don't even get lingerie shots. The fans don't want any such stuff. Watching fully dressed girls smoke is the be-all and end-all of smoxploitation. What sells the videos, says Edward Luisser, a major producer of smoking videos, is "the look, the attitude, the mannerism of smoking. It's not so much the sexuality as the erotic allure, the hint of mystery."

What we have here, in fact, is a brand new kind of fetishism, a specialized kind of erotic behavior that omits the stuff that most of us think of as erotic and substitutes the passion and fervor that arises from watching a pretty woman suck combustion products into her lovely and irreplaceable lungs. The linkage between smoking and sex is old stuff in the films—anyone

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who's seen movies of the 1930s and 1940s can cite any number of tensely erotic scenes involving slinky actresses, square-jawed men, and wisps of curling smoke. But the smoking seems to be *replacing* sex in these new videos. "Smoking is the fetish of the '90s," declares Dian Hanson, the editor of a fetish magazine called *Leg Show* that says it has a circulation of 250,000. "Anytime something becomes widely condemned and taboo, it will be eroticized," says Ms. Hanson, who tries to work smoking scenes into her magazine's photographs every month. Nor are *Leg Show* and *Smoke Signals* the only, ah, sites where this fascination prevails. The Internet folks can drop in at "alt.sex.fetish.smoking" for impassioned discussions of famous women who smoke, and other hot topics.

You don't have to be a smoker, apparently, to want to watch smoking videos. The pleasure is said to come from thinking about the rebellious and defiant nature of women who are so free of inhibition and social restraint that they are willing to flaunt on video their defiance of today's taboo against lighting up. They are engaging in wild and crazy stuff, in the context of the no-smoking 1990s, and that makes them exciting. Go figure.

I'm a life-long non-smoker myself, who has always found the habit nasty and isn't turned on by people who practice it. And as I read about all this latest manifestation of modern-day creepiness (or so I see it) in the *Journal,* what came immediately to my mind is the scary, brilliant story called "Coming Attraction" by the late Fritz Leiber, one of the greatest of all SF writers, published all the way back in 1950. (You can find it in my anthology *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame,* classic stories chosen by vote by the Science Fiction Writers of America.) Leiber's story, nearly half a century old now, was a good thirty years ahead of its time in its depiction of the dark and strange thing that our end-of-the-century world has become. Though something as inherently innocuous as getting kicks from sitting around watching films of women smoking is mild by comparison with many of the things Leiber imagined in "Coming Attraction," it nevertheless would have been an appropriate companion to the other forms of decadence that made the story so memorable.

The Leiber story takes place in New York of the near future—Leiber doesn't specify the date, but my guess is that he meant it to be thirty years or so later than the time of the story's creation—which is to say, about fifteen years in our actual past by now. It opens fast. "The coupe with the fishhooks welded to the fender shouldered up over the curb like the nose of a nightmare. The girl in its path stood frozen, her face probably stiff with fright under her mask. I took a fast step toward her, grabbed her elbow, yanked her back. . . . The big coupe shot by, its turbine humming." It's a vile time, all right. Roving gangs of juvenile delin-

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quents are everywhere. Their cars have fishhooks on them to skewer pedestrians, and leave huge clouds of black smoke behind them as they make their getaways. Women wear masks in the street, but often leave their breasts bare. They also go in for affixing razor-sharp metal caps to their fingertips, so that a slap or a caress is likely to draw blood. (Some of the kinkier men wear masks too—the newest kind of cross-dressing.) The most popular sport is man/woman wrestling, using big, strong women and small wiry men. The most familiar plot in hard-boiled crime novels is the one in which two female murderers go gunning for each other. Nightclubs are dim places glowing blue, where what would later be called go-go girls dance non-stop, naked except for their masks. Popular music—and remember that Leiber was writing in the era of Perry Como and Bing Crosby—is pretty much what you'd expect: "There was a band going full blast in the latest robop style, in which an electronic composing machine selects an arbitrary sequence of tones into which the musicians weave their raucous little individualities."

Things get darker and darker, and eventually, after a brawl in a night-club, the narrator pulls the mask from the face of his new companion, the girl whom he had rescued from the fishhook car. "I don't know why I should have expected her face to be anything else. It was very pale, of course, and there weren't any cosmetics. I suppose there's no point in wearing any under a mask. The eyebrows were untidy and the lips chapped. But

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as for the general expression, as for the feelings crawling and wriggling across it—

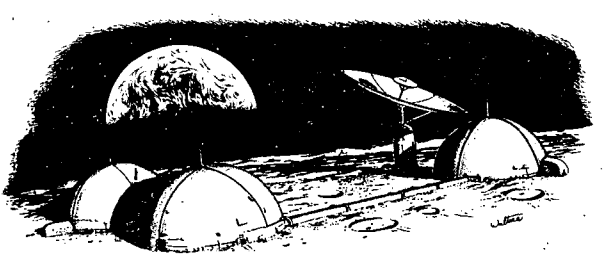
"Have you ever lifted a rock from damp soil? Have you ever watched the slimy white grubs?"

I should point out that Leiber needed an atomic war as the rationale for the changes that brought about the sinister society depicted in "Coming Attraction." He tells us about radioactive hell-pits in downtown Manhattan and shows us the stump of the Empire State Building and mothers carrying mutant children through the streets. That was all a plausible enough scenario in 1950. But we didn't need Soviet megatonnage detonating in our cities to bring us the music, drugs, dress, and body-piercings of our time. We managed to reach the decadence and all-out creepiness of Leiber's future America all by ourselves, a voluntary cultural evolution, without such explosive help from outside.

Fritz Leiber, were he alive today, would not be at all surprised to hear that the high-minded movement that has virtually driven cigarette smoking from public America has led directly to the desire, on the part of some citizens at least, to stare with delight at the spectacle of delectable videotaped women practicing snap inhales and slow exhales. The eroticization of the forbidden was something that Fritz Leiber understood very well. I wouldn't be at all surprised, in fact, to find some casual reference to something very much like the smoxploitation videos somewhere in one of his actual stories. The really sad thing, I think, is that "Coming Attraction" doesn't even seem shocking any more. Why should it? We see analogous horrors every day and take them for granted.

It's a weird time, isn't it, folks? You and I, of course, are still leading clean, wholesome lives amidst all the cultural detritus of the bizarre and freaky late 1990s. We don't wear masks in the street, we don't try to slice up pedestrians with sharp hooks welded to the fenders of our cars, and we don't go to blue-lit night-clubs to listen to ghastly discordant music. We don't smoke, either, and we don't get thrills from watching young women dragging deep. We are nice folks, you and I, not in any way kinky. But the crazy stuff that's going on all around us, as the century winds down—

Oh, Fritz! Oh, Jesus! ●



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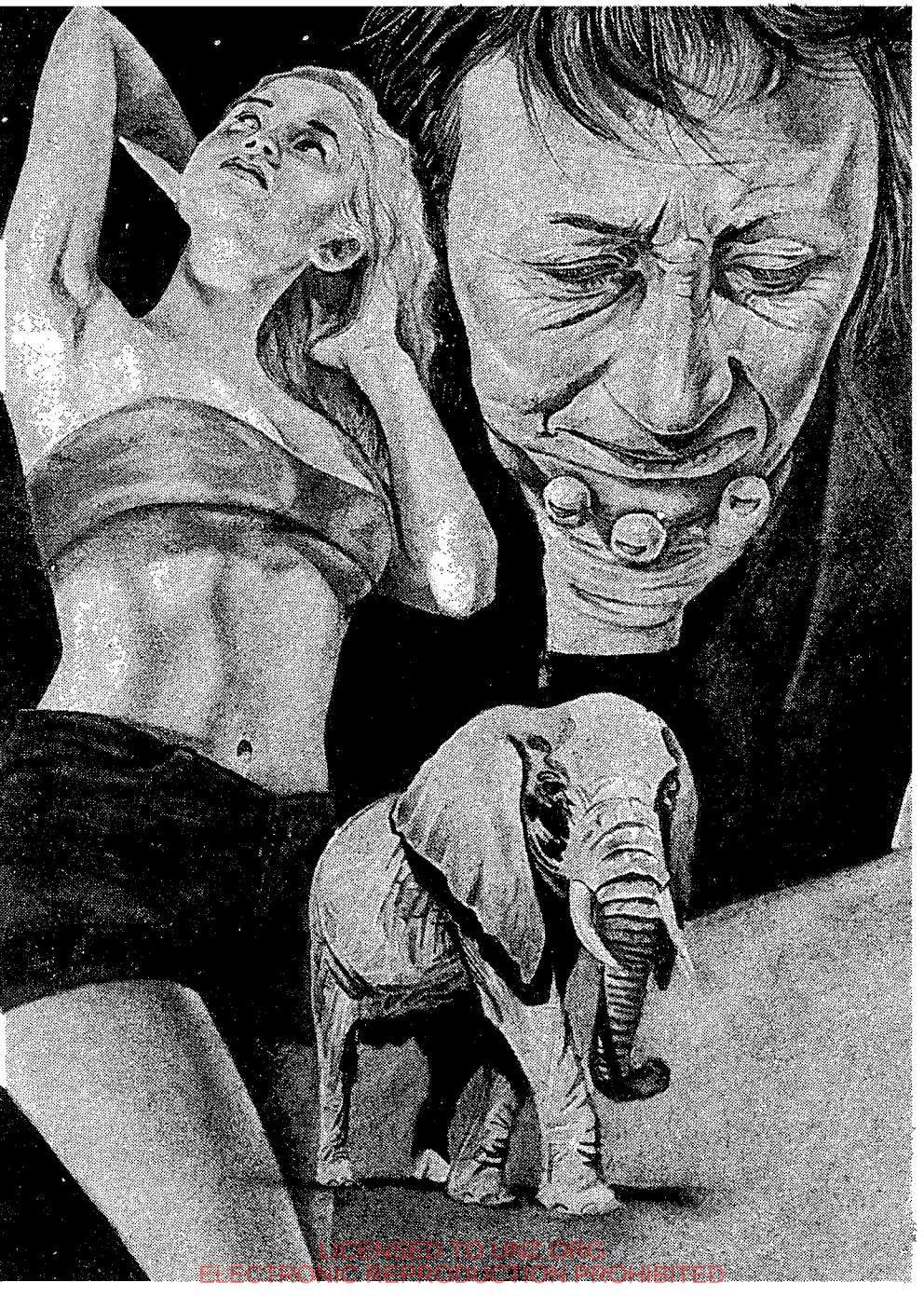

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The American edition of Paul J. McAuley's most recent novel, *Fairyland* (which won the 1995 Arthur C. Clarke Award for best SF novel published in the United Kingdom), came out from AvoNova last fall. Mr. McAuley's last story for *Asimov's*, "The Temptation of Dr. Stein" (January 1996), was set in Renaissance Venice. He returns to our pages with a clever hard science fiction tale whose action mostly takes place under the icy surface of Proteus, a battered moon of Neptune.

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The transport, once owned by an outer system cartel and appropriated by Earth's Pacific Community after the Quiet War, ran in a continuous, ever-changing orbit between Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune. It never docked. It mined the solar wind for hydrogen to mix with the nanogram of antimatter that could power it for a century, and once or twice a year, during its intricate gravity-assisted loops between Saturn's moons, maintenance drones attached remora-like to its hull, and fixed whatever its self-repairing systems couldn't handle.

Ben Lo and the six other members of the first trade delegation to Proteus since the war were transferred onto the transport as it looped around Titan, still sleeping in the hibernation pods they'd climbed into in Earth orbit. Sixty days later, they were released from the transport in individual drop capsules of structural diamond, like so many seeds scattered by a pod.

Ben Lo, swaddled in the crash web that took up most of the volume of the drop capsule's little bubble, watched with growing vertigo as the battered face of Proteus drew closer. He had been awakened only a day ago, and was as weak and unsteady as a new-born kitten. The sun was behind the bubble's braking chute. Ahead, Neptune's disc was tipped in star-sprinkled black above the little moon. Neptune was subtly banded with blue and violet, its poles capped with white cloud, its equator streaked with cirrus. Slowly, slowly, Proteus began to eclipse it. The transport had already dwindled to a bright point amongst the bright points of the stars, on its way to spin up around Neptune, loop past Triton, and head on out for the next leg of its continuous voyage, halfway across the solar system to Uranus.

Like many of the moons of the outer planets, Proteus was a ball of ice and rock. Over billions of years, most of the rock had sunk to the core, and the moon's icy, dirty white surface was splotched with a scattering of large impact craters with black interiors, like well-used ash trays, and dissected by large stress fractures, some running halfway round the little globe.

The spy fell toward Proteus in a thin transparent bubble of carbon, wearing a paper suit and a diaper, and trussed up in a cradle of smart cabling like an early Christian martyr. He could barely move a muscle. Invisible laser light poured all around him—the capsule was opaque to the frequency used—gently pushing against the braking sail which had unfolded and spun into a twenty kilometer diameter mirror after the capsule had been released by the transport. Everything was fine.

The capsule said, "Only another twelve hours, Mr. Lo. I suggest that you sleep. Elfhame's time zone is ten hours behind Greenwich Mean Time."

Had he been asleep for a moment? Ben Lo blinked and said, "Jet lag," and laughed.

"I don't understand," the capsule said politely. It didn't need to be very

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intelligent. All it had to do was control the attitude of the braking sail, and keep its passenger amused and reassured until landing. Then it would be recycled.

Ben Lo didn't bother to try to explain. He was feeling the same kind of yawning apprehension that must have gripped ninety-year-old airline passengers at the end of the twentieth century. A sense of deep dislocation and estrangement. How strange that I'm here, he thought. And, how did it happen? When he'd been born, spaceships had been crude, disposable chemical rockets. The first men on the moon. President Kennedy's assassination. No, that happened before I was born. For a moment, his yawning sense of dislocation threatened to swallow him whole, but then he had it under control and it dwindled to mere strangeness. It was the treatment, he thought. The treatment and the hibernation.

Somewhere down there in the white moonscape, in one of the smaller canyons, was Ben Lo's first wife. But he mustn't think of that. Not yet. Because if he did . . . no, he couldn't remember. Something bad, though.

"I can offer a variety of virtualities," the capsule said. Its voice was a husky contralto. It added, "Certain sexual services are also available."

"What I'd like is a chateaubriand steak butterflied and well-grilled over hickory wood, a Caesar salad, and a 1998 Walnut Creek Cabernet Sauvignon."

"I can offer a range of nutritive pastes, and eight flavors of water, including a balanced electrolyte," the capsule said. A prissy note seemed to have edged into its voice. It added, "I would recommend that you restrict intake of solids and fluids until after landing."

Ben Lo sighed. He had already had his skin scrubbed and repopulated with strains of bacteria and yeast native to the Protean ecosystem, and his GI tract had been reamed out and packed with a neutral gel containing a benign strain of *E. coli*. He said, "Give me an inflight movie."

"I would recommend virtualities," the capsule said. "I have a wide selection."

Despite the capsule's minuscule intelligence, it had a greater memory capacity than all the personal computers on Earth at the end of the millennium. Ben Lo had downloaded his own archives into it.

"*Wings of Desire,*" he said.

"But it's in black and white! And flat. And only two senses—"

"There's color later on. It has a particular relevance to me, I think. Once upon a time, capsule, there was a man who was very old, and became young again, and found that he'd lost himself. Run the movie, and you'll understand a little bit about me."

The moon, Neptune, the stars, fell into a single point of light. The light went out. The film began.

Falling through a cone of laser light, the man and the capsule watched how an angel became a human being, out of love.

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* * *

The capsule skimmed the moon's dirty-white surface and shed the last of its relative velocity in the inertia buffers of the target zone, leaving its braking sail to collapse across kilometers of moonscape. It was picked up by a striding tripod that looked like a prop from *The War of the Worlds,* and carried down a steeply sloping tunnel through triple airlocks into something like the ER room of a hospital. With the other members of the trade delegation, Ben Lo, numbed by neural blocks, was decanted, stripped, washed, and dressed in fresh paper clothes.

Somewhere in the press of nurses and technicians he thought he glimpsed someone he knew, or thought he knew. A woman, her familiar face grown old, eyes faded blue in a face wrinkled as a turtle's. . . . But then he was lifted onto a gurney and wheeled away.

Waking, he had problems with remembering who he was. He knew he was nowhere on Earth. A universally impersonal hotel room, but he was virtually in free fall. Some moon, then. But what role was he playing?

He got up, moving carefully in the fractional gravity, and pulled aside the floor-to-ceiling drapes. It was night, and across a kilometer of black air was a steep dark mountainside or perhaps a vast building, with lights wound at its base, shimmering on a river down there. . . .

Proteus. Neptune. The trade delegation. And the thing he couldn't think about, which was fractionally nearer the surface now, like a word at the back of his tongue. He could feel it, but he couldn't shape it. Not yet.

He stripped in the small, brightly lit sphere of the bathroom and turned the walls to mirrors and looked at himself. He was too young to be who he thought he was. No, that was the treatment, of course. His third. Then why was his skin this color? He hadn't bothered to tint it for . . . how long?

That sci-fi version of *Othello,* a century and a half ago, when he'd been a movie star. He remembered the movie vividly, although not the making of it. But that was the color he was now, his skin a rich dark mahogany, gleaming as if oiled in the lights, his hair a cap of tight black curls.

He slept again, and dreamed of his childhood home. San Francisco. Sailboats scattered across the blue bay. He'd had a little boat, a Laser. The cold salt smell of the sea. The pinnacles of the rust-red bridge looming out of banks of fog, and the fog horn booming mournfully. Cabbage leaves in the gutters of Spring Street. The crowds swirling under the crimson and gold neon lights of the trinket shops of Grant Avenue, and the intersection at Grant and California tingling with trolley car bells.

He remembered everything as if he had just seen it in a movie. Non-associational aphasia. It was a side effect of the treatment he'd just had. He'd been warned about it, but it was still unsettling. The woman he was

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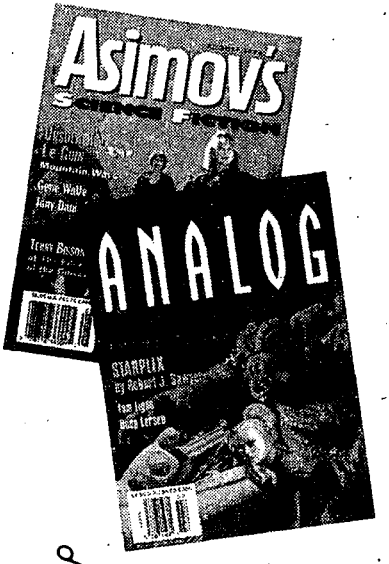

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here to . . . Avernus. Her name now. But when they had been married, a hundred and sixty-odd years ago, she had been called Barbara Reiner. He tried to remember the taste of her mouth, the texture of her skin, and could not.

The next transport would not swing by Proteus for a hundred and seventy days, so there was no hurry to begin the formal business of the trade delegation. For a while, its members were treated as favored tourists, in a place that had no tourist industry at all.

The sinuous rill canyon which housed Elfhame had been burned to an even depth of a kilometer, sealed under a construction diamond roof, and pressurized to 750 millibars with a nitrox mix enriched with 1 percent carbon dioxide to stimulate plant growth. The canyon ran for fifty kilometers through a basaltic surface extrusion, possibly the remnant of the giant impact that had resurfaced the farside hemisphere of the moon a billion years ago, or the result of vulcanism caused by thermal drag when the satellite had been captured by Neptune.

The sides of the canyon were raked to form a deep vee in profile, with a long narrow lake lying at the bottom like a black ribbon, dusted with a scattering of pink and white coral keys. The Elfhamers called it the Skagerrak. The sides of the canyon were steeply terraced, with narrow vegetable gardens, rice paddies, and farms on the higher levels, close to the lamps that, strung from the diamond roof, gave an insolation equivalent to that of the Martian surface. Further down, amongst pocket parks and linear strips of designer wilderness, houses clung to the steep slopes like soap bubbles, or stood on platforms or bluffs, all with panoramic views of the lake at the bottom and screened from their neighbors by soaring ginkgoes, cypress, palmettos, bamboo (which grew to fifty meters in the microgravity), and dragon's blood trees. All the houses were large and individually designed; Elfhamers went in for extended families. At the lowest levels were the government buildings, commercial malls and parks, the university and hospital, and the single hotel, which bore all the marks of having been recently constructed for the trade delegation. And then there was the lake, the Skagerrak, with its freshwater corals and teeming fish, and slow, ten-meter-high waves. The single, crescent-shaped beach of black sand at what Elfhamers called the North End was very steeply raked, and constantly renewed; the surfing was fabulous.

There was no real transportion system except for a single tube train line that shuttled along the west side, and moving lines with T-bar seats, like ski lifts, that made silver lines along the steep terraced slopes. Mostly, people bounded around in huge kangaroo leaps, or flew using startlingly small wings of diamond foil or little hand-held airscrews—the gravity was so low, 0.007g, that human flight was ridiculously easy. Children rode airboards or simply dived from terrace to terrace, which strict-

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ly speaking was illegal, but even adults did it sometimes, and it seemed to be one of those laws to which no one paid much attention unless someone got hurt. It *was* possible to break a bone if you jumped from the top of the canyon and managed to land on one of the lakeside terraces, but you'd have to work at it. Some of the kids did—the latest craze was terrace bouncing, in which half a dozen screaming youngsters tried to find out how quickly they could get from top to bottom with the fewest touchdown points.

The entire place, with its controlled, indoor weather, its bland affluent sheen, and its universal cleanliness, was ridiculously vulnerable. It reminded Ben Lo of nothing so much as an old-fashioned shopping mall, the one at Santa Monica, for instance. He'd had a bit part in a movie made in that mall, somewhere near the start of his career. He was still having trouble with his memory. He could remember every movie he'd made, but couldn't remember *making* any one of them.

He asked his guide if it was possible to get to the real surface. She was taken aback by the request, then suggested that he could access a mobot using the point-of-presence facility of his hotel room.

"Several hundred were released fifty years ago, and some of them are still running, I suppose. Really, there is nothing up there but some industrial units."

"I guess Avernus has her labs on the surface."

Instantly, the spy was on the alert, suppressing a thrill of panic.

His guide was a very tall, thin, pale girl called Marla. Most Elfhamers were descended from Nordic stock, and Marla had the high cheekbones, blue eyes, blond hair, and the open and candid manner of her counterparts on Earth. Like most Elfhamers, she was tanned and athletically lithe, and wore a distractingly small amount of fabric: tight shorts, a band of material across her small breasts, plastic sandals, a communications bracelet.

At the mention of Avernus, Marla's eyebrows dented over her slim, straight nose. She said, "I would suppose so, yah, but there's nothing interesting to see. The program, it is reaching the end of its natural life, you see. The surface is not interesting, and it is dangerous. The cold and the vacuum, and still the risk of micrometeorites. Better to live inside."

Like worms in an apple, the spy thought. The girl was soft and foolish, very young and very naïve. It was only natural that a member of the trade delegation would be interested in Elfhame's most famous citizen. She wouldn't think anything of this.

Ben Lo blinked and said, "Well, yes, but I've never been there. It would be something, for someone of my age to set foot on the surface of a moon of Neptune. I was born two years before the first landing on Earth's moon, you know. Have you ever been up there?"

Marla's teeth were even and pearly white, and when she smiled, as she

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did now, she seemed to have altogether too many. "By point-of-presence, of course. It is part of our education. It is fine enough in its own way, but the surface is not our home, you understand."

They were sitting on the terrace of a café that angled out over the lake. Resin tables and chairs painted white, clipped bay trees in big white pots, terra-cotta tiles, slightly sticky underfoot, like all the floor coverings in Elfhame. Bulbs of schnapps cooled in an ice bucket.

Ben Lo tipped his chair back and looked up at the narrow strip of black sky and its strings of brilliant lamps that hung high above the steep terraces on the far side of the lake. He said, "You can't see the stars. You can't even see Neptune."

"Well, we *are* on the farside," Marla said, reasonably. "But by point-of-presence mobot I have seen it, several times. I have been on Earth the same way, and Mars, but those were fixed, because of the signal lag."

"Yes, but you might as well look at a picture!"

Marla laughed. "Oh, yah. Of course. I forget that you are once a capitalist—" the way she said it, he might have been a dodo, or a dolphin—"from the United States of the Americas, as it was called then. That is why you put such trust in what you call *real*. But really, it is not such a big difference. You put on a mask, or you put on a pressure suit. It is all barriers to experience. And what is to see? Dusty ice, and the same black sky as home, but with more and weaker lamps. We do not need the surface."

Ben Lo didn't press the point. His guide was perfectly charming, if earnest and humorless, and brightly but brainlessly enthusiastic for the party line, like a cadre from one of the supernats. She was transparently a government spy, and was recording everything—she had shown him the little button camera and asked his permission.

"Such a historical event this is, Mr. Lo, that we wish to make a permanent record of it. You will I hope not mind?"

So now Ben Lo changed the subject, and asked why there were no sailboats on the lake, and then had to explain to Marla what a sailboat was.

Her smile was brilliant when she finally understood. "Oh yah, there are some I think who use such boards on the water, like surfing boards with sails."

"Sailboards, sure."

"The waves are very high, so it is not easy a sport. Not many are allowed, besides, because of the film."

It turned out that there was a monomolecular film across the whole lake, to stop great gobs of it floating off into the lakeside terraces.

A gong beat softly in the air. Marla looked at her watch. It was tattooed on her slim, tanned wrist. "Now it will rain soon. We should go inside, I think. I can show you the library this afternoon. There are several real books in it that one of our first citizens brought all the way from Earth."

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* * *

When he was not sight-seeing or attending coordination meetings with the others in the trade delegation (he knew none of them well, and they were all so much younger than him, and as bright and enthusiastic as Marla), he spent a lot of time in the library. He told Marla that he was gathering background information that would help finesse the target packages of economic exchange, and she said that it was good, this was an open society, they had nothing to hide. Of course, he couldn't use his own archive, which was under bonded quarantine, but he was happy enough typing away at one of the library terminals for hours on end, and after a while, Marla left him to it. He also made use of various point-of-presence mobots to explore the surface, especially around Elfhame's roof.

And then there were the diplomatic functions to attend: a party in the prime minister's house, a monstrous construction of pine logs and steeply pitched roofs of wooden shingles cantilevered above the lake; a reception in the assembly room of the parliament, the Riksdag; others at the university and the Supreme Court. Ben Lo started to get a permanent crick in his neck from looking up at the faces of his etiolated hosts while making conversation.

At one, held in the humid, rarefied atmosphere of the research greenhouses near the top of the East Wall of Elfhame, Ben Lo glimpsed Avernus again. His heart lifted strangely, and the spy broke off from the one-sided conversation with an earnest hydroponicist and pushed through the throng toward his target, the floor sucking at his sandals with each step.

The old woman was surrounded by a gaggle of young giants, set apart from the rest of the party. The spy was aware of people watching when he took Avernus's hand, something that caused a murmur of unrest amongst her companions.

"An old custom, dears," Avernus told them. "We predate most of the plagues that made such gestures taboo, even after the plagues were defeated. Ben, dear, what a surprise. I had hoped never to see you again. Your employers have a strange sense of humor."

A young man with big, red-framed data glasses said, "You know each other?"

"We lived in the same city," Avernus said, "many years ago." She had brushed her vigorous grey hair back from her forehead. The wine-dark velvet wrap did not flatter her skinny old woman's body. She said to Ben, "You look so young."

"My third treatment," he confessed.

Avernus said, "It was once said that in American lives there was no second act—but biotech has given almost everyone who can afford it a second act, and for some a third one, too. But what to *do* in them? One simply can't pretend to be young again—one is too aware of death, and has too much at stake, too much invested in *self,* to risk being young."

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"There's no longer any America," Ben Lo said. "Perhaps that helps."

"To be without loyalty," the old woman said, "except to one's own continuity."

The spy winced, but did not show it.

The old woman took his elbow. Her grip was surprisingly strong. "Pretend to be interested, dear," she said. "We are having a delightful conversation in this delightful party. Smile. That's better!"

Her companions laughed uneasily at this. Avernus said quietly to Ben, "You must visit me."

"I have an escort."

"Of course you do. I'm sure someone as resourceful as you will think of something. Ah, this must be your guide. What a tall girl!"

Avernus turned away, and her companions closed around her, turning their long bare backs on the Earthman.

Ben Lo asked Marla what Avernus was doing there. He was dizzy with the contrast between what his wife had been, and what she had become. He could hardly remember what they had talked about. Meet. They had to meet. They would meet.

It was beginning.

Marla said, "It is a politeness to her. Really, she should not have come, and we are glad she is leaving early. You do not worry about her, Mr. Lo. She is a sideline. We look inward, we reject the insane plans of the previous administration. Would you like to see the new oil-rich strains of *Chlorella* we use?"

Ben Lo smiled diplomatically. "It would be very interesting."

There had been a change of government, after the war. It had been less violent and more serious than a revolution, more like a change of climate, or of religion. Before the Quiet War (that was what it was called on Earth, for although tens of thousands had died in the war, none had died on *Earth*), Proteus had been loosely allied with, but not committed to, an amorphous group which wanted to exploit the outer reaches of the solar system, beyond Pluto's orbit; after the war, Proteus dropped its expansionist plans and sought to reestablish links with the trading communities of Earth.

Avernus had been on the losing side of the change in political climate. Brought in by the previous regime because of her skills in gengeneering vacuum organisms, she found herself sidelined and ostracized, her research group disbanded and replaced by government cadres, funds for her research suddenly diverted to new projects. But her contract bound her to Proteus for the next ten years, and the new government refused to release her. She had developed several important new dendrimers, light-harvesting molecules used in artificial photosynthesis, and established several potentially valuable genelines, including a novel form of photo-

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synthesis based on a sulphur-spring *Chloroflexus* bacterium. The government wanted to license them, but to do that it had to keep Avernus under contract, even if it would not allow her to work.

Avernus wanted to escape, and Ben Lo was there to help her. The Pacific Community had plenty of uses for vacuum organisms—there was the whole of the Moon to use as a garden, to begin with—and was prepared to overlook Avernus's political stance in exchange for her expertise and her knowledge.

He was beginning to remember more and more, but there was still so much he didn't know. He supposed that the knowledge had been buried, and would flower in due course. He tried not to worry about it.

Meanwhile, the meetings of the trade delegation and Elfhame's industrial executive finally began. Ben Lo spent most of the next ten days in a closed room dickering with Parliamentary speakers on the Trade Committee over marginal rates for exotic organics. When the meetings were finally over, he slept for three hours and then, still logy from lack of sleep but filled with excess energy, went body surfing at the black beach at the North End. It was the first time he had managed to evade Marla. She had been as exhausted as he had been by the rounds of negotiations, and he had promised that he would sleep all day so that she could get some rest.

The surf was tremendous, huge smooth slow glassy swells falling from thirty meters to batter the soft, sugary black sand with giant's paws. The air was full of spinning globs of water, and so hazed with spray, like a rain of foamy flowers, that it was necessary to wear a filtermask. It was what the whole lake would be like, without its monomolecular membrane.

Ben Lo had thought he would still have an aptitude for body surfing, because he'd done so much of it when he had been living in Los Angeles, before his movie career really took off. But he was as helpless as a kitten in the swells, his boogie board turning turtle as often as not, and twice he was caught in the undertow. The second time, a pale naked giantess got an arm around his chest and hauled him up onto dry sand.

After he hawked up a couple of lungs-full of fresh water, he managed to gasp his thanks. The woman smiled. She had black hair in a bristle cut, and startlingly green eyes. She was very tall and very thin, and completely naked. She said, "At last you are away from that revisionist bitch."

Ben Lo sat up, abruptly conscious, in the presence of this young naked giantess, of his own nakedness. "Ah. You are one of Avernus's—"

The woman walked away with her boogie board under her arm, pale buttocks flexing. The spy unclipped the ankle line that tethered him to his rented board, bounded up the beach in two leaps, pulled on his shorts, and followed.

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Sometime later, he was standing in the middle of a vast red-lit room at blood heat and what felt like a hundred percent humidity. Racks of large-leaved plants receded into infinity; those nearest him towered high above, forming a living green wall. His arm stung, and the tall young woman, naked under a green gown open down the front, but masked and wearing disposable gloves, deftly caught the glob of expressed blood—his blood—in a capillary straw, took a disc of skin from his forearm with a spring-loaded punch, sprayed the wound with sealant and went off with her samples.

A necessary precaution, the old woman said. Avernus. He remembered now. Or at least could picture it. Taking a ski lift all the way to the top. Through a tunnel lined with tall plastic bags in which green *Chlorella* cultures bubbled under lights strobing in fifty millisecond pulses. Another attack of memory loss—they seemed to be increasing in frequency. Stress, he told himself.

"Of all the people I could identify," Avernus said, "they had to send *you*."

"Ask me anything," Ben Lo said, although he wasn't sure that he recalled very much of their brief marriage.

"I mean identify genetically. We exchanged strands of hair in amber, do you remember? I kept mine. It was mounted in a ring."

"I didn't think that you were sentimental."

"It was my idea, and I did it with all my husbands. It reminded me of what I once was."

"My wife."

"An idiot."

"I must get back to the hotel soon. If they find out I've been wandering around without my escort, they'll start to suspect."

"Good. Let them worry. What can they do? Arrest me? Arrest you?"

"I have diplomatic immunity."

Avernus laughed. "Ben, Ben, you always were so status-conscious. That's why I left. I was just another thing you'd collected. A trophy, like your Porsche, or your Picasso."

He didn't remember.

"It wasn't a very good Picasso. One of his fakes—do you know that story?"

"I suppose I sold it."

The young woman in the green gown came back. "A positive match," she said. "Probability of a negative identity point oh oh one or less. But he is doped up with immunosuppressants and testosterone."

"The treatment," the spy said glibly. "Is this where you do your research?"

"Of course not. They certainly would notice if you turned up there. This

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is one of the pharm farms. They grow tobacco here, with human genes inserted to make various immunoglobulins. They took away my people, Ben, and replaced them with spies. Ludmilla is one of my original team. They put her to drilling new agricultural tunnels."

"We are alone here," Ludmilla said.

"Or you would have made your own arrangements."

"I hate being dependent on people. Especially from Earth, if you'll forgive me. And especially you. Are the others in your trade delegation. . . ?"

"Just a cover," the spy said. "They know nothing. They are looking forward to your arrival in Tycho. The laboratory is ready to be fitted out to your specifications."

"I swore I'd never go back, but they are fools here. They stand on the edge of greatness, the next big push, and they turn their backs on it and burrow into the ice like maggots."

The spy took her hands in his. Her skin was loose on her bones, and dry and cold despite the humid heat of the hydroponic greenhouse. He said, "Are you ready? Truly ready?"

She did not pull away. "I have said so. I will submit to any test, if it makes your masters happy. Ben, you are exactly as I remember you. It is very strange."

"The treatments are very good now. You must use one."

"Don't think I haven't, although not as radical as yours. I like to show my age. You could shrivel up like a Struldbrugg, and I don't have to worry about *that,* at least. That skin color, though. Is it a fashion?"

"I was Othello, once. Don't you like it?" Under the red lights his skin gleamed with a ebony luster.

"I always thought you'd make a good Iago, if only you had been clever enough. I asked for someone I knew, and they sent you. It almost makes me want to distrust them."

"We were young, then." He was trying to remember, searching her face. Well, it was two hundred years ago. Still, he felt as if he trembled at a great brink, and a tremendous feeling of nostalgia for what he could not remember swept through him. Tears grew like big lenses over his eyes and he brushed them into the air and apologized.

"I am here to do a job," he said, and said it as much for his benefit as hers.

Avernus said, "Be honest, Ben. You hardly remember anything."

"Well, it *was* a long time ago." But he did not feel relieved at this admission. The past was gone. No more than pictures, no longer a part of him.

Avernus said, "When we got married, I was in love, and a fool. It was in the Wayfarer's Chapel, do you remember? Hot and dry, with a Santa Ana blowing, and Channel Five's news helicopter hovering overhead. You were already famous, and two years later you were so famous I no longer recognized you."

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They talked a little while about his career. The acting, the successful terms as state senator, the unsuccessful term as congressman, the fortune he had made in land deals after the partition of the USA, his semi-retirement in the upper house of the Pacific Community parliament. It was a little like an interrogation, but he didn't mind it. At least he knew *this* story well.

The tall young woman, Ludmilla, took him back to the hotel. It seemed natural that she should stay for a drink, and then that they should make love, with a languor and then an urgency that surprised him, although he had been told that restoration of his testosterone levels would sometimes cause emotional or physical cruxes that would require resolution. Ben Lo had made love in microgravity many times, but never before with someone who had been born to it. Afterward, Ludmilla rose up from the bed and moved gracefully about the room, dipping and turning as she pulled on her scanty clothes.

"I will see you again," she said, and then she was gone.

The negotiations resumed, a punishing schedule taking up at least twelve hours a day. And there were the briefings and summary sessions with the other delegates, as well as the other work the spy had to attend to when Marla thought he was asleep. Fortunately, he had a kink that allowed him to build up sleep debt and get by on an hour a night. He'd sleep long when this was done, all the way back to Earth with his prize. Then at last it was all in place, and he only had to wait.

Another reception, this time in the little zoo halfway up the West Side. The Elfhamers were running out of novel places to entertain the delegates. Most of the animals looked vaguely unhappy in the microgravity and none were very large. Bushbabies, armadillos, and mice; a pair of hippopotami no larger than domestic cats; a knee-high pink elephant with some kind of skin problem behind its disproportionately large ears.

Ludmilla brushed past Ben Lo as he came out of the rest room and said, "When can she go?"

"Tonight," the spy said.

Everything had been ready for fourteen days now. He went to find something to do now that he was committed to action.

Marla was feeding peanuts to the dwarf elephant. Ben Lo said, "Aren't you worried that the animals might escape? You wouldn't want mice running around your Shangri-la."

"They all have a kink in their metabolism. An artificial amino acid they need. That girl you talked with was once one of Avernus's assistants. She should not be here."

"She propositioned me." Marla said nothing. He said, "There are no side deals. If someone wants anything, they have to bring it to the table through the proper channels."

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"You are an oddity here, it is true. Too much muscles. Many women would sleep with you, out of curiosity."

"But *you* have never asked, Marla. I'm ashamed." He said it playfully, but he saw that Marla suspected something. It didn't matter. Everything was in place.

They came for him that night, but he was awake and dressed, counting off the minutes until his little bundle of surprises started to unpack itself. There were two of them, armed with tasers and sticky foam canisters. The spy blinded them with homemade capsicum spray (he'd stolen chilli pods from one of the hydroponic farms and suspended a water extract in a perfume spray) and killed them as they blundered about, screaming and pawing at their eyes. One of them was Marla, another a well-muscled policeman who must have spent a good portion of each day in a centrifuge gym. The spy disabled the sprinkler system, set fire to his room, kicked out the window, and ran.

There were more police waiting outside the main entrance of the hotel. The spy ran right over the edge of the terrace and landed two hundred meters down amongst blue pines grown into bubbles of soft needles in the microgravity. Above, the fire touched off the homemade plastic explosive, and a fan of burning debris shot out above the spy's head, seeming to hover in the black air for a long time before beginning to flutter down toward the Skagerrak. Briefly, he wondered if any of the delegation had survived. It didn't matter. The young, enthusiastic, and naïve delegates had always been expendable.

Half the lights were out in Elfhame, and all of the transportation systems, the phone system was crashing and resetting every five minutes, and the braking lasers were sending twenty-millisecond pulses to a narrow wedge of the sky. It was a dumb bug, only a thousand lines long. The spy had laboriously typed it from memory into the library system, which connected with everything else. It wouldn't take long to trace, but by then, other things would start happening.

The spy waited in the cover of the bushy pine trees. One of his teeth was capped and he pulled it out and unraveled the length of monomolecular diamond wire coiled inside.

In the distance, people called to each other over a backdrop of ringing bells and sirens and klaxons. Flashlights flickered in the darkness on the far side of the Skagerrak's black gulf; on the terrace above the spy's hiding place, the police seemed to have brought the fire in the hotel under control. Then the branches of the pines started to doff as a wind came up; the bug had reached the air conditioning. In the darkness below, waves grew higher on the Skagerrak, sloshing and crashing together, as the wind drove waves toward the beach at the North End and reflected waves clashed with those coming onshore. The monomolecular film over

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the lake's surface was not infinitely strong. The wind began to tear spray from the tops of the towering waves, and filled the lower level of the canyon with flying foam flowers. Soon the waves would grow so tall that they'd spill over the lower levels.

The spy counted out ten minutes, and then started to bound up the terraces, putting all his strength into his thigh and back muscles. Most of the setbacks between each terrace were no more than thirty meters high; for someone with muscles accustomed to one gee, it was easy enough to scale them with a single jump in the microgravity, even from a standing start.

He was halfway there when the zoo's elephant charged past him in the windy semidarkness. Its trunk was raised above its head and it trumpeted a single despairing cry as it ran over the edge of the narrow terrace. Its momentum carried it a long way out into the air before it began to fall, outsized ears flapping as if trying to lift it. Higher up, the plastic explosive charges the spy had made from sugar, gelatin, and lubricating grease blew out hectares of plastic sheeting and structural frames from the long greenhouses.

The spy's legs were like wood when he reached the high agricultural regions; his heart was pounding and his lungs were burning as he tried to strain oxygen from the thin air. He grabbed a fire extinguisher and mingled with panicked staff, ricocheting down long corridors and bounding across windblown fields of crops edged by shattered glass walls and lit by stuttering red emergency lighting. He was only challenged once, and he struck the woman with the butt end of the fire extinguisher and ran on without bothering to check if she was dead or not.

Marla had shown him the place where they stored genetic material on one of her endless tours. Everything was kept in liquid nitrogen, and there was a wide selection of dewar flasks. He chose one about the size of a human head, filled it, and clamped on the lid.

Then through a set of double pressure doors, banging the switch that closed them behind him, setting down the flask and dropping the coil of diamond wire beside it, stepping into a dressing frame, and finally pausing, breathing hard, dry-mouthed and suddenly trembling, as the vacuum suit was assembled around him. As the gold-filmed bubble was lowered over his head and clamped to the neck seal, Ben Lo started, as if waking. Something was terribly wrong. What was he doing here?

Dry air hissed around his face; headup displays stuttered and scrolled down. The spy walked out of the frame, stowed the diamond wire in one of the suit's utility pockets, picked up the flask of liquid nitrogen, and started the airlock cycle, ignoring the computer's contralto as it recited a series of safety precautions while the room revolved, and opened on a flood of sunlight.

The spy came out at the top of the South End of Elfhame. The canyon

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stretched away to the north, its construction-diamond roof like black sheet-ice: a long, narrow lake of ice curving away downhill, it seemed, between odd, rounded hills like half-buried snowballs, their sides spattered with perfect round craters. He bounded around the tangle of pipes and fins of some kind of distillery or cracking plant, and saw the line of the railway arrowing away across a glaring white plain toward an horizon as close as the top of a hill.

The railway was a single rail hung from smart A-frames whose carbon fiber legs compensated for movements in the icy surface. Thirteen hundred kilometers long, it described a complete circle around the little moon from pole to pole, part of the infrastructure left over from Elfhame's expansionist phase, when it was planned to string sibling settlements all the way around the moon.

The spy kangaroo-hopped along the sunward side of the railway, heading south toward the rendezvous point they had agreed upon. In five minutes, the canyon and its associated domes and industrial plant had disappeared beneath the horizon behind him. The ice was rippled and cracked and blistered, and crunched under the cleats of his boots at each touchdown.

"That was some diversion," a voice said over the open channel. "I hope no one was killed."

"Just an elephant, I think. Although if it landed in the lake, it might have survived." He wasn't about to tell Avernus about Marla and the policeman.

The spy stopped in the shadow of a carbon-fiber pillar, and scanned the icy terrain ahead of him. The point-of-presence mobots hadn't been allowed into this area. The ice curved away to the east and south like a warped checkerboard. There was a criss-cross pattern of ridges that marked out regular squares about two hundred meters on each side, and each square was a different color. Vacuum organisms. He'd reached the experimental plots.

Avernus said over the open channel, "I can't see the pickup."

He started along the line again. At the top of his leap, he said, "I've already signaled to the transport using the braking lasers. It'll be here in less than an hour. We're a little ahead of schedule."

The transport was a small gig with a brute of a motor taking up most of its hull, leaving room for only a single hibernation pod and a small storage compartment. If everything went according to plan, that was all he would need.

He came down and leaped again, and then he saw her on the far side of the curved checkerboard of the experimental plots, a tiny figure in a transparent vacuum suit sitting on a slope of black ice at what looked like the edge of the world. He bounded across the fields toward her.

The ridges were only a meter high and a couple of meters across, dirty water and methane ice fused smooth as glass. It was easy to leap over

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each of them—the gravity was so light that the spy could probably get into orbit if he wasn't careful. Each field held a different growth. A corrugated grey mold that gave like rubber under his boots. Flexible spikes the color of dried blood, all different heights and thicknesses, but none higher than his knees. More grey stuff, this time mounded in discrete blisters each several meters from its nearest neighbors, with fat grey ropes running beneath the ice. Irregular stacks of what looked like black plates that gave way, halfway across the field, to a blanket of black stuff like cracked tar.

The figure had turned to watch him, its helmet a gold bubble that refracted the rays of the tiny, intensely bright star of the sun. As the spy made the final bound across the last of the experimental plots—more of the black stuff, like a huge wrinkled vinyl blanket dissected by deep wandering cracks—Avernus said in his ear, "You should have kept to the boundary walls."

"It doesn't matter now."

"Ah, but I think you'll find it does."

Avernus was sitting in her pressure suit on top of a ridge of upturned strata at the rim of a huge crater. Her suit was transparent, after the fashion of the losing side of the Quiet War. It was intended to minimize the barrier between the human and the vacuum environments. She might as well have flown a flag declaring her allegiance to the outer alliance. Behind her, the crater stretched away south and west, and the railway ran right out above its dark floor on pillars that doubled and tripled in height as they stepped away down the inner slope. The crater was so large that its far side was hidden beyond the little moon's curvature. The black stuff had overgrown the ridge, and flowed down into the crater. Avernus was sitting in the only clear spot.

She said, "This is my most successful strain. You can see how vigorous it is. You didn't get that suit from my lab, did you? I suggest you keep moving around. This stuff is thixotropic in the presence of foreign bodies, like smart paint. It spreads out, flowing under pressure, over the neighboring organisms, but doesn't overgrow itself."

The spy looked down, and saw that the big cleated boots of his pressure suit had already sunken to the ankles in the black stuff. He lifted one, then the other; it was like walking in tar. He took a step toward her, and the ground collapsed beneath his boots and he was suddenly up to his knees in black stuff.

"My suit," Avernus said, "is coated with the protein by which the strain recognizes its own self. You could say I'm like a virus, fooling the immune system. I dug a trench, and that's what you stepped into. Where is the transport?"

"On its way, but you don't have to worry about it," the spy said, as he struggled to free himself. "This silly little trap won't hold me for long."

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Avernus stepped back. She was four meters away, and the black stuff was thigh deep around the spy now, sluggishly flowing upward. The spy flipped the catches on the flask and tipped liquid nitrogen over the stuff. The nitrogen boiled up in a cloud of dense vapor and evaporated. It had made no difference at all to the stuff's integrity.

A point of light began to grow brighter above the close horizon of the moon, moving swiftly aslant the field of stars.

"It gets brittle at close to absolute zero," Avernus said, "but only after several dozen hours." She turned, and added, "There's the transport."

The spy snarled at her. He was up to his waist, and had to fold his arms across his chest, or else they would be caught fast.

Avernus said, "You never were Ben Lo, were you? Or at any rate no more than a poor copy. The original is back on Earth, alive or dead. If he's alive, no doubt he'll claim that this is all a trick of the outer alliance against the Elfhamers and their new allies, the Pacific Community."

He said, "There's still time, Barbara. We can do this together."

The woman in the transparent pressure suit turned back to look at him. Sun flared on her bubble helmet. "Ben, poor Ben. I'll call you that for the sake of convenience. Do you know what happened to you? Someone used you. That body isn't even yours. It isn't anyone's. Oh, it looks like you, and I suppose the altered skin color disguises the rougher edges of the plastic surgery. The skin matches your genotype, and so does the blood, but the skin was cloned from your original, and the blood must come from marrow implants. No wonder there's so much immunosuppressant in your system. If we had just trusted your skin and blood, we would not have known. But your sperm—it was all female. Not a single Y chromosome. I think you're probably haploid, a construct from an unfertilized blastula. You're not even male, except somatically—you're swamped with testosterone, probably have been since gastrulation. You're a *weapon,* Ben. They used things like you as assassins in the Quiet War."

He was in a pressure suit, with dry air blowing around his head and headup displays blinking at the bottom of the clear helmet. A black landscape, and stars high above, with something bright pulsing, growing closer. A spaceship! That was important, but he couldn't remember why. He tried to move, and discovered that he was trapped in something like tar that came to his waist. He could feel it clamping around his legs, a terrible pressure that was compromising the heat exchange system of his suit. His legs were freezing cold, but his body was hot, and sweat prickled across his skin, collecting in the folds of the suit's undergarment.

"Don't move," a woman's voice said. "It's like quicksand. It flows under pressure. You'll last a little longer if you keep still. Struggling only makes it more liquid."

Barbara. No, she called herself Avernus now. He had the strangest feeling that someone else was there, too, just out of sight. He tried to look

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around, but it was terribly hard in the half-buried suit. He had been kidnapped. It was the only explanation. He remembered running from the burning hotel. . . . He was suddenly certain that the other members of the trade delegation were dead, and cried out, "Help me!"

Avernus squatted in front of him, moving carefully and slowly in her transparent pressure suit. He could just see the outline of her face through the gold film of her helmet's visor. "There are two personalities in there, I think. The dominant one let you back, Ben, so that you would plead with me. But don't plead, Ben. I don't want my last memory of you to be so undignified, and anyway, I won't listen. I won't deny you've been a great help. Elfhame always was a soft target, and you punched just the right buttons, and then you kindly provided the means of getting where I want to go. They'll think I was kidnapped." Avernus turned and pointed up at the sky. "Can you see? That's your transport. Ludmilla is going to reprogram it."

"Take me with you, Barbara."

"Oh, Ben, Ben. But I'm not going to Earth. I considered it, but when they sent you, I knew that there was something wrong. I'm going *out*, Ben. Further out. Beyond Pluto, in the Kuiper Disk, where there are more than fifty thousand objects with a diameter of more than a hundred kilometers, and a billion comet nuclei ten kilometers or so across. And then there's the Oort Cloud, and its billions of comets. The fringes of *that* mingle with the fringes of Alpha Centauri's cometary cloud. Life spreads. That's its one rule. In ten thousand years, my children will reach Alpha Centauri, not by starship, but simply through expansion of their territory."

"That's the way you used to talk when we were married. All that sci-fi you used to read!"

"You don't remember it, Ben. Not really. It was fed to you. All my old interviews, my books and articles, all your old movies. They did a quick construction job, and just when you started to find out about it, the other one took over."

"I don't think I'm quite myself. I don't understand what's happening, but perhaps it is something to do with the treatment I had. I told you about that."

"Hush, dear. There was no treatment. That was when they fixed you in the brain of this empty vessel."

She was too close, and she had half-turned to watch the moving point of light grow brighter. He wanted to warn her, but something clamped his lips and he almost swallowed his tongue. He watched as his left hand stealthily unfastened a utility pocket and pulled out a length of glittering wire fine as a spider-thread. Monomolecular diamond. Serrated along its length, except for five centimeters at each end, it could easily cut through pressure suit material and flesh and bone.

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He knew then. He knew what he was.

The woman looked at him and said sharply, "What are you doing, Ben?"

And for that moment, he was called back, and he made a fist around the thread and plunged it into the black stuff. The spy screamed and reached behind his helmet and dumped all oxygen from his main pack. It hissed for a long time, but the stuff gripping his legs and waist held firm.

"It isn't an anaerobe," Avernus said. She hadn't moved. "It is a vacuum organism. A little oxygen won't hurt it."

Ben Lo found that he could speak. He said, "He wanted to cut off your head."

"I wondered why you were carrying that flask of liquid nitrogen. You were going to take my head back with you—and what? Use a bush robot to strip my brain neuron by neuron and read my memories into a computer? How convenient to have a genius captive in a bottle!"

"It's me, Barbara. I couldn't let him do that to you." His left arm was buried up to the elbow.

"Then thank you, Ben. I'm in your debt."

"I'd ask you to take me with you, but I think there's only one hibernation pod in the transport. You won't be able to take your friend, either."

"Well, Ludmilla has her family here. She doesn't want to leave. Or not yet."

"I can't remember that story about Picasso. Maybe you heard it after we—after the divorce."

"You told it to me, Ben. When things were good between us, you used to tell stories like that."

"Then I've forgotten."

"It's about an art dealer who buys a canvas in a private deal, that is signed 'Picasso.' This is in France, when Picasso was working in Cannes, and the dealer travels there to find if it is genuine. Picasso is working in his studio. He spares the painting a brief glance and dismisses it as a fake."

"I had a Picasso, once. A bull's head. I remember that, Barbara."

"You thought it was a necessary sign of your wealth. You were photographed beside it several times. I always preferred Georges Braque myself. Do you want to hear the rest of the story?"

"I'm still here."

"Of course you are, as long as I stay out of reach. Well, a few months later, the dealer buys another canvas signed by Picasso. Again he travels to the studio; again Picasso spares it no more than a glance, and announces that it is a fake. The dealer protests that this is the very painting he found Picasso working on the first time he visited, but Picasso just shrugs and says, 'I often paint fakes.'"

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His breathing was becoming labored. Was there something wrong with the air system? The black stuff was climbing his chest. He could almost see it move, a creeping wave of black devouring him centimeter by centimeter.

The star was very close to the horizon, now.

He said, "I know a story."

"There's no more time for stories, dear. I can release you, if you want. You only have your reserve air in any case."

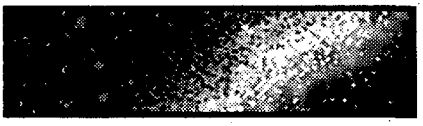
"No. I want to see you go."

"I'll remember you. I'll tell your story far and wide."

Ben Lo heard the echo of another voice across their link, and the woman in the transparent pressure suit stood and lifted a hand in salute and bounded away.

The spy came back, then, but Ben Lo fought him down. There was nothing he could do, after all. The woman was gone. He said, as if to himself, "I know a story. About a man who lost himself, and found himself again, just in time. Listen. *Once upon a time . . .*"

Something bright rose above the horizon and dwindled away into the outer darkness. ●



THIS IMPATIENT APE

Andromeda's light,
as ancient as mastodons,
travels too slowly.

This impatient ape
wants to see what the folks there
are doing right now.

—Steven Utley

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Jack McDevitt

NEVER DESPAIR

The author tells us, "'Never Despair' uses characters from my forthcoming book *Eternity Road,* but chronicles an event that does not quite happen in the same way in the novel." Mr. McDevitt's latest books include the novel *Ancient Shores,* which is currently available from HarperPrism, and a collection of short stories, *Standard Candles,* which was recently released by Tachyon Press. *Eternity Road* will be out from HarperPrism in May.

The rain began to fall as they threw the last few spadefuls of earth onto the grave.

Quait bowed his head and murmured the traditional farewell. Chaka looked at the wooden marker, which bore Flojian's name, his dates, and the legend FAR FROM HOME.

She hadn't cared all that much for Flojian. He was self-centered and he complained a lot and he always knew better ways to do things. But you could count on him to pull his weight, and now there were only two of them.

Quait finished, looked up, and nodded. Her turn. She was glad it was over. The poor son of a bitch had fallen on his head out of the upper level of a ruin, and during four excruciating days, they'd been able to do little for him. Pointless, silly way to die. "Flojian," she said, "we'll miss you." She let it go at that because she meant it, and the rain was coming harder.

They retreated to their horses. Quait packed his spade behind his saddle and mounted in that awkward way that always left her wondering whether Lightfoot would chuck him off on the other side.

She stood looking up at him.

"What's wrong?" He wiped the back of his hand against his cheek. His hat was jammed down on his head. Water spilled out of it onto his shoulders.

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"It's time to give it up," Chaka said. "Go home. If we can." Thunder rumbled. It was getting very dark.

"Not the best time to discuss this." Quait waited for her to get on her horse. The rain pounded the soft earth, fell into the trees.

She looked back toward the grave. Flojian lay with the ruins now, buried like them beneath the rolling hills and the broad forest. It was the sort of grave he would have preferred, she supposed. He liked stuff that had been dead a long time. She pulled her jacket tight and climbed into the saddle. Quait moved off at a brisk trot.

They'd buried him at the top of the highest ridge in the area. Now they rode slowly along the crest, picking their way among broken concrete casts and petrified timbers and corroded metal, the detritus of the old world, sinking slowly into the ground. The debris had been softened by time: earth and grass had rounded the rubble, spilled over it, absorbed its sharp edges. Eventually, she supposed, nothing would be left, and visitors would stand on the ruins and not know they were even here.

Quait bent against the rain, his hat pulled low over his eyes, his right hand pressed against Lightfoot's flank. He looked worn and tired and discouraged, and Chaka realized for the first time that he too had given up. That he was only waiting for someone else to take responsibility for admitting failure.

They dropped down off the ridge, and rode through a narrow defile bordered by blocks and slabs.

"You okay?" he asked.

Chaka was fine. Scared. Exhausted. Wondering what they would say to the widows and mothers when they got home. There had been six when they started. "Yes," she said. "I'm okay."

The grotto lay ahead, a square black mouth rimmed by chalkstone and half-hidden by a bracken. They'd left a fire burning, and it looked warm and good. They dismounted, and led their horses inside.

Quait threw a couple of logs onto the blaze. "Cold out there," he said.

Lightning flashed in the entrance.

They put the teapot onto its boiling rock, fed and watered the animals, changed into dry clothes, and sank down in front of the fire. They didn't talk much for a long time. Chaka sat, wrapped in a blanket, enjoying being warm and away from the rain. Quait made some notes in the journal, trying to establish the site of Flojian's grave, so that future travelers, if there were any, could find it. After a while he sighed and looked up, not at her, but over her shoulder, into the middle distance. "You really think we should turn around?"

"Yeah. I think we've had enough. Time to go home."

He nodded. "I hate to go back like this."

"Me too. But it's time." It was hard to guess what the grotto had been. It was *not* a cave. The walls were artificial. Whatever color they might

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once have possessed had been washed away. Now they were gray and stained, and they curved into a high ceiling. A pattern of slanted lines, probably intended for decorative effect, cut through them. The grotto was wide, wider than the council hall, which could accommodate a hundred people; and it went far back under the hill. Miles, maybe.

As a general principle, she avoided the ruins when she could. It wasn't easy because they were everywhere. But all sorts of critters made their homes among them. And the structures were dangerous, as Flojian had found out. Prone to cave-ins, collapsing floors, you name it. The real reason, though, was that she had heard too many stories about specters and demons among the crumbling walls. She was not superstitious, and would never have admitted her discomfort to Quait. Still, you never knew.

They had found the grotto a few hours after Flojian had gotten hurt, and had moved in, grateful for the shelter. But she was anxious to be gone now.

Thunder shook the walls, and they could hear the steady rhythm of rainwater pouring off the ridge. It was still late afternoon, but all the light had drained out of the day.

"Tea should be ready," said Chaka.

Quait shook his head. "I hate to give it up. We'll always wonder if it might have been over the next hill."

She had just picked up the pot and begun to pour when a bolt exploded directly overhead. "Close," she said, grateful now for the protection of the grotto.

Quait smiled, took his tea, and lifted it in a mock toast to whatever powers lived in the area. "Maybe you're right," he said. "Maybe we should take the hint."

The bolt was drawn by a corroded crosspiece, a misshapen chunk of dissolving metal jutting from the side of the hill. Most of the energy dissipated into the ground. But some of it leaped to a buried cable, followed it down to a melted junction box, flowed through a series of conduits, and lit up several ancient circuit boards. One of the circuit boards relayed power into a long-dormant auxiliary system; another turned on an array of sensors that began to take note of sounds in the grotto. And a third, after an appropriate delay, threw a switch and activated the only program that still survived.

They ate well. Chaka had come across an unlucky turkey that morning, and Quait added some berries and fresh-baked biscuit. They'd long since exhausted their store of wine, but a brook ran through the grotto about sixty yards back, and the water was clear and cold.

"It's not as if we have any reason to think we're close," said Chaka. "I'm not sure I believe in it anyway. Even if it *is* out there, the price is too high."

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The storm eased with the coming of night. Rain still fell steadily, but it was light rain, not much more than mist.

Quait talked extensively through the evening, about his ambitions, about how important it was to find out who had built the great cities scattered through the wilderness, and what had happened to them, and about mastering the ancient wizardries. But she was correct, he kept saying, glancing her way, pausing to give her a chance to interrupt. It was better to be safe than sorry.

"Damn right," said Chaka.

It was warm near the fire, and after a while Quait fell asleep. He'd lost twenty pounds since they'd left Illyria ten weeks before. He had aged, and the good-humored nonchalance that had attracted her during the early days had disappeared. Quait was all business now.

She tried to shake off her sense of despair. They were a long way from home, alone in a wilderness filled with savages and demons and dead cities in which lights blinked and music played and mechanical things moved. She shrank down in her blankets and listened to the water dripping off the trees. A log broke and fell into the fire.

She was not sure what brought her out of it, but she was suddenly awake, senses alert.

Someone, outlined in moonlight, illuminated from behind by the fire, was standing at the exit to the grotto, looking out.

Beside her, Quait's chest gently rose and fell.

She was using her saddle bag for a pillow. Without any visible movement, she eased her gun out of it.

The figure appeared to be a man, somewhat thick at the waist, dressed in peculiar clothes. He wore a dark jacket and dark trousers of matching style, a hat with a rounded top, and he carried a walking stick. There was a red glow near his mouth that alternately dimmed and brightened. She detected an odor that might have been burning weed.

"Don't move," she said softly, rising to confront the apparition. "I have a gun."

He turned, looked curiously at her, and a cloud of smoke rose over his head. He was indeed puffing on something. And the smell was vile. "So you do," he said. "I hope you won't use it."

He didn't seem sufficiently impressed. "I mean it," she said.

"I'm sorry." He smiled. "I didn't mean to wake you." He wore a white shirt and a dark blue ribbon tied in a bow at his throat. The ribbon was sprinkled with white polka dots. His hair was white, and he had gruff, almost fierce, features. There was something of the bulldog about him. He advanced a couple of paces and removed his hat.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. "Who are you?"

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"I live here, young lady."

"Where?" She glanced around at the bare walls, which seemed to move in the flickering light.

"Here." He lifted his arms to indicate the grotto and took another step forward.

She glanced at the gun and back at him. "That's far enough," she said. "Don't think I would hesitate."

"I'm sure you wouldn't, young lady." The stern cast of his features dissolved into an amiable smile. "I'm really not dangerous."

"Are you alone?" she asked, taking a quick look behind her. Nothing stirred in the depths of the cave.

"I am now. Franklin used to be here. And Abraham Lincoln. And an American singer. A guitar player, as I recall. Actually there used to be a considerable crowd of us."

Chaka didn't like the way the conversation was going. It sounded as if he were trying to distract her. "If I get any surprises," she said, "the first bullet's for you."

"It *is* good to have visitors again. The last few times I've been up and about, the building's been empty."

"Really?" *What* building?

"Oh, yes. We used to draw substantial crowds. But the benches and the gallery have gone missing." He looked slowly around. "I wonder what happened."

"What is your name?" she said.

He looked puzzled. Almost taken aback. "You don't know?" He leaned on his cane and studied her closely. "Then I think there is not much point to this conversation."

"How *would* I know you? We've never met." She waited for a response. When none came, she continued: "I am Chaka of Illyria."

The man bowed slightly. "I suppose, under the circumstances, you must call me Winston." He drew his jacket about him. "It *is* drafty. Why don't we retire to the fireside, Chaka of Illyria?"

If he were hostile, she and Quait would already be dead. Or worse. She lowered the weapon and put it in her belt. "I'm surprised to find anyone here. No offense, but this place looks as if it has been deserted a long time."

"Yes. It does, doesn't it?"

She glanced at Quait, dead to the world. Lot of good he'd have been if Tuks came sneaking up in the night. "Where have you been?" she asked.

"I beg your pardon?"

"*We've* been here several days. Where have *you* been?"

He looked uncertain. "I'm not sure," he said. "I was certainly here. I'm always here." He lowered himself unsteadily to the ground and held his hands up to the fire. "Feels good."

"It *is* cold."

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"You haven't any brandy, by chance, I don't suppose?"

What was brandy? "No," she said. "We don't."

"Pity. It's good for old bones." He shrugged and looked around. "Strange," he said. "Do *you* know what's happened?"

"No." She didn't even understand the question. "I have no idea."

Winston placed his hat in his lap. "The place looks quite abandoned," he said. Somehow, the fact of desolation acquired significance from his having noted it. "I regret to say I have never heard of Illyria. Where is it, may I ask?"

"Several weeks to the southwest. In the valley of the Mawagondi."

"I see." His tone suggested very clearly that he did *not* see. "And who are the Mawagondi?"

"It is a *river*. Do you really not know of it?"

He peered into her eyes. "I fear there is a great deal I do not know." His mood seemed to have darkened. "Are you and your friend going home?" he asked.

"No," she said. "We seek Haven."

"You are welcome to stay here," said Winston. "But I do not think you will find it very comfortable."

"Thank you, no. I was referring to *the* Haven. And I know how that sounds."

Winston nodded, and his forehead crinkled. There was a brooding fire in his eyes. "Is it near Boston?"

Chaka looked over at Quait and wondered whether she should wake him. "I don't know," she said. "Where is Boston?"

That brought a wide smile. "Well," he said, "it certainly appears *one* of us is terribly *lost*. I wonder which of us it is."

She saw the glint in his eye and returned the smile. She understood what he was saying in his oddly accented diction: they were *both* lost.

"Where's Boston?" she asked again.

"Forty miles east. Straight down the highway."

"What highway? There's no highway out there anywhere. At least none that *I've* seen."

The cigar tip brightened and dimmed. "Oh, my. It must be a long time."

She pulled up her knees and wrapped her arms around them. "Winston, I really don't understand much of this conversation."

"Nor do I." His eyes looked deep into hers. "What is this *Haven?*"

She was shocked at his ignorance. "You are not serious."

"I am quite serious. Please enlighten me."

Well, after all he was living out here in the wilderness. How could she expect him to know such things? "Haven was the home of Abraham Polk," she said hopefully.

Winston shook his head sheepishly. "Try again," he said.

"Polk lived at the end of the age of the Roadmakers. He knew the world

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was collapsing, that the cities were dying. He saved what he could. The treasures. The knowledge. The history. Everything. And he stored it in a fortress with an undersea entrance."

"An undersea entrance," said Winston. "How do you propose to get in?"

"I don't think we shall," said Chaka. "I believe we will give it up at this point and go home."

Winston nodded. "The fire's getting low," he said.

She poked at it, and added a log. "No one even knows whether Polk really lived. He may only be a legend."

Light filled the grotto entrance. Seconds later, thunder rumbled. "Haven sounds quite a lot like Camelot," he said.

What the devil is Camelot?

"You've implied," he continued after taking a moment to enjoy his weed, "that the world outside is in ruins."

"Oh, no. The world outside is lovely."

"But there are ruins?"

"Yes."

"Extensive?"

"They fill the forests, clog the rivers, lie in the shallow waters of the harbors. They are everywhere. Some are even active, in strange ways. There is, for example, a train that still runs, on which no one rides."

"And what do you know of their builders?"

She shrugged. "Very little. Almost nothing."

"Their secrets are locked in this *Haven?*"

"Yes."

"Which you are about to turn your back on."

"We're exhausted, Winston."

"Your driving curiosity, Chaka, leaves me breathless."

Damn. "Look, it's easy enough for *you* to point a finger. You have no idea what we've been through. None."

Winston stared steadily at her. "I'm sure I don't. But the prize is very great. And the sea is close."

"There are only two of us left," she said.

"The turnings of history are never directed by crowds," he said. "Nor by the cautious. Always, it is the lone captain who sets the course."

"It's over. We'll be lucky to get home alive."

"That may also be true. And certainly going on to your goal entails a great risk. But you must decide whether the prize is not worth the risk."

"*We* will decide. I have a partner in the enterprise."

"He will abide by your decision. It is up to *you*."

She tried to hold angry tears back. "We've done enough. It would be unreasonable to go on."

"The value of reason is often exaggerated, Chaka. It would have been reasonable to accept Hitler's offer of terms in 1940."

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"What?"

He waved the question away. "It's of no consequence. But reason, under pressure, usually produces prudence when boldness is called for."

"I am not a coward, Winston."

"I did not imply you are." He bit down hard on his weed. A blue cloud drifted toward her. It hurt her eyes and she backed away.

"Are you a ghost?" she asked. The question did not seem at all foolish.

"I suspect I am. I'm something left behind by the retreating tide." The fire glowed in his eyes. "I wonder whether, when an event is no longer remembered by any living person, it loses all significance? Whether it is as if it never happened?"

Quait stirred in his sleep, but did not wake.

"I'm sure I don't know," said Chaka.

For a long time, neither of them spoke.

Winston got to his feet. "I'm not comfortable here," he said.

She thought he was expressing displeasure with her.

"The floor is hard on an old man. And of course you are right: *you* must decide whether you will go on. Camelot was a never-never land. Its chief value lay in the fact that it existed only as an *idea*. Perhaps the same thing is true of Haven."

"No," she said. "It *exists*."

"And is anyone else looking for this place?"

"No one. We will be the second mission to fail. I think there will be no more."

"Then for God's sake, Chaka of Illyria, you must ask yourself *why* you came all this way. Why your companions died. What you seek."

"Money. Pure and simple. Ancient manuscripts are priceless. We'd have been famous throughout the League. That's why we came."

His eyes grew thoughtful. "Then go back," he said. "If this is a purely commercial venture, write it off and put your money in real estate."

"Beg pardon?"

"But I would put it to you that those are *not* the reasons you dared so much. And that you wish to turn back because you have forgotten why you came."

"That's not so!" she said.

"Of course it's so. Shall I tell you why you undertook to travel through an unknown world, on the hope that you might, *might*, find a place that's half-mythical?" Momentarily he seemed to fade, to lose definition. "Haven has nothing to do with fame or wealth. If you got there, if you were able to read its secrets, you would have all that, provided you could get home with it. But you would have acquired something infinitely more valuable, and I believe you know that: you would have discovered who you really *are*. You would have learned that you are a daughter of the

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people who designed the Acropolis, who wrote *Hamlet,* who visited the moons of Neptune. Do you know about Neptune?"

"No," she said. "I don't think so."

"Then we've lost everything, Chaka. But *you* can get it back. If you are willing to take it. And if not you, then someone else. But it is worth the taking, at whatever cost."

Momentarily, he became one with the dark.

"Winston," she said, "I can't see you. Are you still there?"

"I am here. The system is old, and will not keep a charge."

She was looking *through* him. "You really *are* a ghost," she said.

"It is possible you will not succeed. Nothing is certain, save difficulty and trial. But have courage. Never surrender!"

She stared at him.

"Never despair," he said.

A sudden chill whispered through her, a sense that she had been here before, had known this man in another life. "You seem vaguely familiar. Have I seen your picture somewhere?"

"I'm sure I do not know."

"Perhaps it is the words. They have an echo."

He looked directly at her. "Possibly." She could see the cave entrance and a few stars through his silhouette. "Keep in mind, whatever happens, you are one of a select company. A proud band of brothers. And sisters. You will never be alone."

As she watched, he faded until only the glow of the cigar remained. "It is your own true self you seek."

"You presume a great deal."

"I know you, Chaka." Everything was gone now. Except the voice. "I *know* who you are. And you are about to learn."

"Was it his first or last name?" asked Quait, as they saddled the horses.

"Now that you mention it, I really don't know." She frowned. "I'm not sure whether he was real or not. He left no prints. No marks."

Quait looked toward the rising sun. The sky was clear. "That's the way of it in these places. Some of it's illusion; some of it's something else. But I wish you'd woken me."

"So do I." She climbed up and patted Brak's shoulder. "He said the sea is only forty miles."

Warm spring air flowed over them. "You want to go on?"

"Quait, you ever hear of Neptune?"

He shook his head.

"Maybe," she said, "we can try *that* next."●

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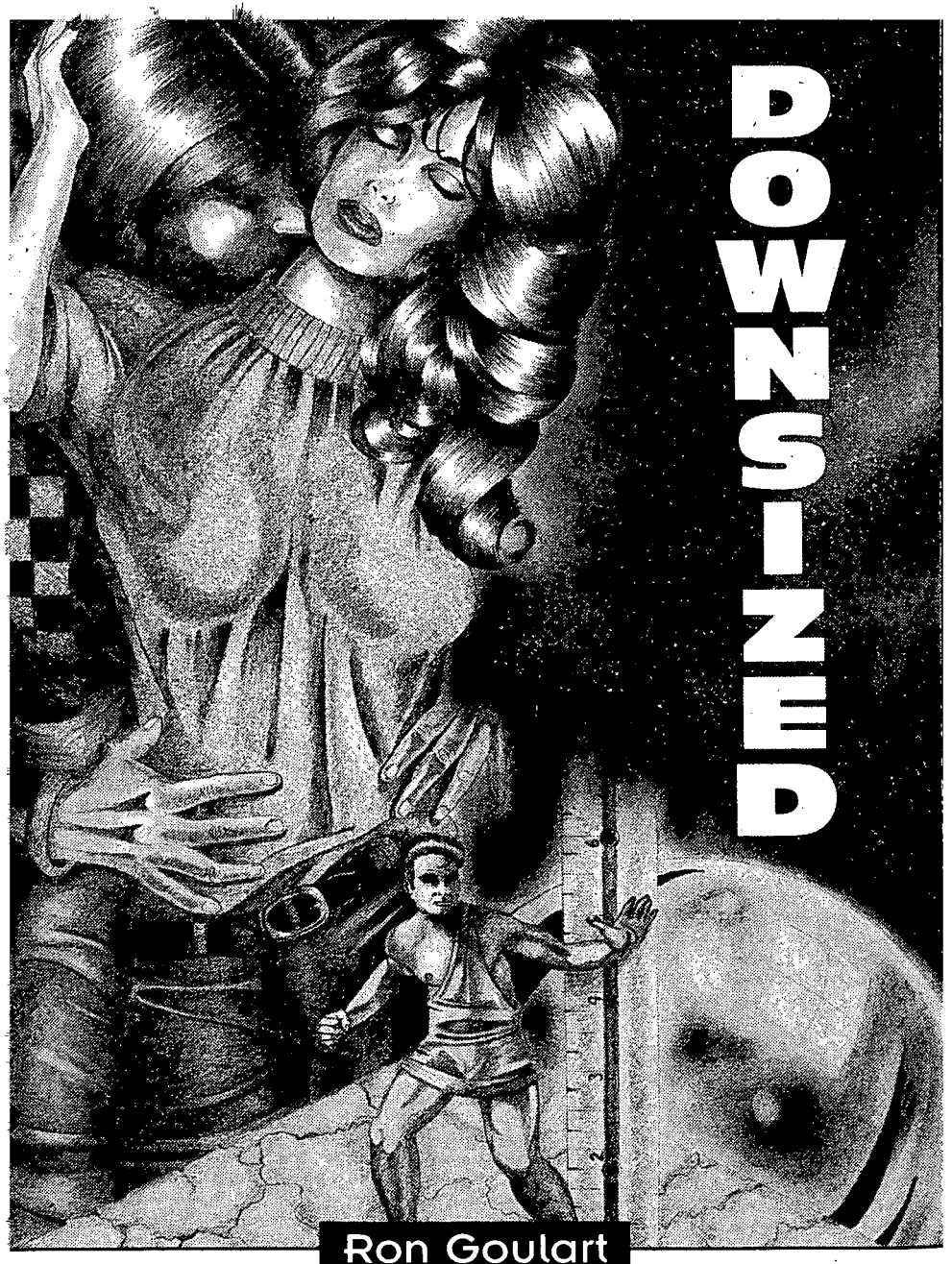

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After too long an absence, Ron Goulart returns to our pages with another of his quirky looks at Hollywood's magic. The author has recently sold a comic ghost fantasy screenplay to Nickelodeon for movie development, and he continues to act as a consultant on William Shatner's Tek War novels. Mr. Goulart tells us that his next novel will be a comic mystery with an unusual private detective. It should be available sometime this year.

Illustration by Paul Wagner

Movies and folklore to the contrary, sudden and profound changes in your size can be both advantageous and a great deal of fun. Although, admittedly, when Norm Keenan first shrank down to the height of a beer can, he was completely and totally unhappy about the experience. For one thing, Norm had gone into this simply to have his weight, his moderately double chin and so on, modified. The unexpected side effect of the procedure devastated him initially and for several minutes after the shrinking he wandered around, tangled deep inside his now huge shirt, trousers, and underwear, cursing his fate and lamenting the fact he'd ever followed the advice of his agent about having his fading looks improved.

Norm had never heard of the Rumhauser Process until that afternoon. He was sitting, unhappily, in his stranded eleven-year-old Mercedes on a twisting side street at the edge of Beverly Hills, awaiting a tow truck, when his agent told him about Rumhauser.

A vaguely handsome man of forty-three, Norm was not quite tall and possibly ten or fifteen pounds overweight. He was a successful actor—well, relatively successful—in both movies and television. You may remember him as the nice-guy next-door neighbor on the *I Married A Fat Girl* sitcom a few seasons back.

The car phone buzzed as he was anxiously sitting there and fretting. He had to read for a part over at the Wheelan Studios in less than an hour. It was a hot hazy afternoon in late autumn and the interior of the Mercedes smelled of whatever it was his wife had packed in his lunch box.

"Yeah?"

"Schmuck, what did I tell you about putting a smile in your voice when you answer the damned phone?"

"Hello, Mildred," he said, without a trace of a smile in his voice. "You better have some good news. I can't accommodate any more negative—"

"Stop being a self-pitying wampus," advised Mildred Lutz.

"Who's going to pity me if I don't?"

"I just heard from Snickerson over at Dynamo Productions," said his agent.

"Do I have the part?"

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"Not exactly, dear."

"Meaning what?"

"First, let me go over this little list I'm clutching," she suggested in her sharp, nasal voice. "Then I'll get to the important point I want to make about your career at this stage of your life. I'm sorry to tell you, Norm, that you've been turned down for the part of the serial killer in *Naked Greed*, nixed for the part of the nice next-door neighbor in the new *Dull As Dishwater* sitcom, the part of the serial killer in *The Big Bad Wolf*, the role of the Venusian veterinarian on *Spaceblast: The 2nd Generation*, and the dual role of the twin bartenders in *Drunk Tank II*."

"I just told you I didn't want to hear any negative news," he complained, sighing. "My battery is dead, Mildred, I think I have a cold coming on, and my lunch box has just commenced leaking." He tapped the dented old black box that rested beside him. Something thick, brown, and foul-smelling was gurgling out onto the ripped passenger seat.

"You're married to Sally Jane Winn for Christ sake, the Cheapjack Gourmet herself," his agent pointed out. "The most successful cookbook author in the entire bushwhacking world. She drags down a seven-figure income. Tell the scrawny wench to buy you a new car and a new lunch box."

"She's no scrawnier than you, Mildred."

"So am I claiming I'm not a dreadful wench myself?"

"Let's get back to the issues. Nobody seems to be hiring me these days. It can't be that I'm washed up, can it?"

"I'll be honest with you, Norm, dear." There was a very faint touch of sympathy in her sharp voice. "I keep getting the same identical feedback from all the producers, directors and yahoos that I'm pitching you to."

"It's my politics, isn't it?"

"You don't have any politics. No, it's your looks."

"My looks?" Norm sat up straight, causing the seatbelt to dig into his chest. "My looks, Mildred, are just about my only remaining asset."

"Maybe you better think about declaring bankruptcy then, dear," she said. "The bottom line here seems to be that you're looking too seedy, too flabby, and are generally in schlumpy shape."

"How can you look too seedy to play a serial killer? And if I did that Venusian, hell, they'd make me up so—"

"I have also been hearing complaints, dear, about your fanny."

"What sort of complaints?"

"Some people have remarked that it's grown far too wide, others contend that it sags to a faretheewell."

"Is there some ideal width for a Venusian veterinarian's backside?"

"Hey, don't kill the messenger, Norm. I am merely passing along, being an agent who has your best interests at heart, what these suetballs

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tell me," Mildred reminded. "Oh, and I forgot to mention this—you can forget the appointment at Wheelan today."

"Hum?"

"Bidderman called a little while ago. Seems he got a glimpse of you at a screening couple nights ago. He's decided you're too chubby for this part."

"I'm trying out for the role of the compulsive eater in *Malibu Clinic.* How can I be too fat for the part of an overweight character?"

"Exactly what I tried to point out to the jerk. But he suggests that you're way too flabby and saggy."

"It's really, you know, Sally Jane's fault. Being a gourmet cook and writing books and being on television and all—she's always leaving sample meals around for me to test."

"Flush them down the biffy and say they tasted lovely. All that namby-pamby swill she dreams up is going straight to your bottom."

"It isn't that simple, Mildred. There's a questionnaire she leaves with each new recipe sample. I mean, how can you, without actually eating the damned stuff, answer a question like: 'Is there too much tarragon in this?' "

"All these years in Hollywood and you still can't lie?" She gave a disappointed snort. "But never mind that now. I have the solution to your problem."

"Which problem?"

"Your looks, dear, your crummy appearance."

"All I need is a few weeks at the gym."

"No, nope. I promised Snickerson you'd be in tip top shape by next Friday."

"C'mon, Mildred, even if I fast, jog and lift heavy—"

"All you have to do is visit Rumhauser."

"What's that?"

"Fred Rumhauser. He invented the Rumhauser Process."

"He'd be the logical one to do that, I guess. But who the hell is he?"

The lunch box made a gurgling sound and the lid came popping open. More brown liquid was bubbling up out of the tarnished silver thermos. Norm pushed the box further away from him.

"Fred Rumhauser is a genius," continued his agent.

"Everybody is around here. Give me some specifics."

"He specializes in morphological transformations that—"

"Wait, whoa. I'm not going to let a plastic surgeon slice up my person." He noticed that the fizzing liquid in the box had washed across the day's questionnaire and stained it badly.

"Rumhauser, trust me, isn't a sawbones. This is a radical, unique process for modifying the appearance and the weight."

"I'm not going to gobble up a lot of pills either, Mildred."

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"No pills," she promised. "Have you seen Steve Banner lately?"

"Last week on Rodeo Drive for a minute. Why?"

"Didn't he look absolutely terrific?"

"Not especially, no."

"He looks ten years younger."

"Since he's only twenty-five, that's—"

"But his life-style—all those pills and drugs he was ingesting—aged him. Then he visited Rumhauser."

"Steve did have a nice tan, now I think about it."

"You've got an appointment at Rumhauser's at 3:30 this afternoon." She gave him an address in Santa Monica.

"That's not a very impressive location."

"Rumhauser doesn't go in for frills."

"You couldn't in that neighborhood."

"Go see him, dear. It's, really, your last chance."

"I'd like to talk it over with Sally Jane first."

"How can you accomplish that? She's always off taping a show or autographing her latest—"

"We talk on the phone at least once a day. And we have dinner together once every week, come what may."

"You don't have time to waffle around on this, Norm. You absolutely have to get going on this right away."

He gave a resigned sigh. "Okay, I'll go see the guy," he said with no enthusiasm. "What sort of method does he use exactly?"

"Sorcery," she answered and hung up.

Rumhauser stepped on his crystal ball, tripped, went flying, briefly, up into the air. His long, star-studded black robe swirled up and Norm noticed that the small old man wasn't wearing anything under it but a tattered pair of candy-striped shorts.

"Blast and darn," muttered Rumhauser as he hit the threadbare rug, hard, on his left hip. "How'd that danged crystal get underfoot?"

"Your cat whacked it off the table while you were over at the bookcase," explained Norm, who was seated, none too comfortably, in a folding metal chair on one side of the rickety folding card table in the center of the small, shadowy parlor. "If it's all the same to you, Mr. Rumhauser, I think I'll leave now and forget about—"

"Don't be a ninny." Rumhauser, who was about five-foot-four and in his late sixties, got himself upright and then booted the crystal off into a dim corner. "Mildred will chastise you soundly if you don't shape up darned soon, lad."

"Even so, I'm starting to feel a strong lack of confidence in you."

An enormous whooshing sound suddenly filled the room.

Rumhauser scowled in the direction of the window, which was shielded

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by a dusty venetian blind. "Never go into business next door to a car-wash."

"That's another thing. If you're such a splendid sorcerer, how come you're operating out of this dump?"

The older man held up a stained forefinger. "Camouflage," he answered. "It's not smart to stir up too much envy in this burgh."

"Besides which, if you're so good at modifying appearances—well, why are you so runty?"

"Compact, Norm. I'm *compact*." Brushing at the wrinkled robe, he seated himself again at the table. "The robe, case you're wondering, is left over from my theatrical days." He gestured toward the left-hand wall.

There was a huge faded poster tacked and taped up there to the peeling wallpaper. *The Amazing Rumhauser,* it announced over a very flattering painting of a younger Rumhauser, in robe and turban, elevating a blonde in a satin nightdress up high off the stage.

"Then you're not a real wizard, only a show-business one."

"Used to be a phony," he admitted. "Now, though, I'm the real thing." He frowned, glancing from his left hand to his right. "Where'd I put that darned book?"

"You dropped it when you hit the floor." Norm pointed.

Rumhauser jumped up, kicking at his shaggy black cat and missing entirely. "Don't claw that book, you heathen," he warned, stooping, swaying some, and scooping up the heavy leather-bound volume. "Using a rare and powerful arcane tome for a scratching post."

The book gave off a small, wispy cloud of dust when he thumped it on the wobbly table. One of the folding legs started to fold.

Norm caught the table edge and kept it from collapsing. "Actually, Mr. Rumhauser, I'd just as soon not continue with this." He fixed the table and stood up.

"Sit down, Norm," suggested the sorcerer. "Listen, I guarantee you I can beef up your faltering looks. In addition, I'll throw in, free of charge and at no extra cost whatsoever, some useful info on your domestic travails."

Norm, slowly, sat down. "I don't have any domestic problems," he assured the robed Rumhauser. "What are you hinting at? Is this some sort of carnival come-on?"

"Feast your eyes on that handsome poster again, lad," suggested Rumhauser, angry. "It does not state that I was appearing at some cheap carny. Nope, it quite specifically says I was doing an extended engagement at the Royal Dinner Theater in Mentor, Ohio. A very prestigious house it was, I can assure you."

"What do you mean about my having trouble at home? Sally Jane and I are—"

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"Never trust a woman with a name like Sally Jane," Rumhauser told him. "It's too sweet and innocent-sounding to be on the up and up. Dames with sultry names like Marlene, Hedy or Olga are the ones who actually—"

"There's nothing sultry about Olga. But what are you hinting about my wife, Rumhauser?"

"Surely you know, don't you, about Mr. Flowerpot?"

Putting both elbows on the table top, producing twin thumps, he stared across at the sorcerer. "Mr. Flowerpot? What's that kiddy folk singer got to do with Sally Jane?"

"Torrid affair," amplified Rumhauser. "Been going on, hot and heavy, for nigh on to two years, lad."

"Bullshit. Sally Jane and I talk over every single thing that—"

"Don't be a dope, Norm. You don't actually think your missus is going to traipse into the breakfast nook one morning and blurt out—'Hi, honey. I've been out all night rolling in the hay with a gawky young fellow who sings inane ditties on PBS kids' shows, earns two-and-a-half million bucks a year from concerts, tapes and CDs and appears on the stage clad in bright yellow overalls with an inverted flowerpot for a hat and can't really play the guitar, even the cheap polka dot one he lugs around, for sour beans?' Naw, no rational broad's going to admit anything like that. Instead, as Sally Jane's been doing, she's going to make up excuses and you, simp that you are, are going to swallow them. Along with endless gourmet atrocities."

"This is all a con you're attempting. You're planning to blackmail me."

Rumhauser chuckled dryly. "How in blue blazes can I blackmail *you,* Norm, when it's your lady who's getting into the lemon-hued jeans of this guy?"

Norm pushed his lopsided chair back. "I'm not going to sit here while you make—"

"Matter of fact, she's with him this very afternoon."

"This afternoon? No, she's taping a cooking lesson."

Rumhauser pointed at the place where the crystal ball had sat before the shaggy cat swatted it. "I was doing a little background check on you, Norm, before you showed up. It was all in there."

"I still don't believe a word of this crap."

"Suit yourself, pal." He patted the cover of the ancient book. "Let's move on to the important stuff. This book happens to be one of the few extant copies in the world and is high up on the list of forbidden books. It is entitled, and I quote, *The Magical Transformation of the Flesh & Related Dark Secrets.*"

"I never heard of it."

"So? How many horrendously evil and forbidden books are you familiar with?" He made a scornful noise. "The discovery of this very book, in a junk shop in Iola, Wisconsin, some years ago, started me on my career as

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a true wizard. For your little flab problem, Norm, we'll be using a spell concocted by the author himself, the infamous Count Monstrodamus. It'll slim you down about twenty pounds, tidy up the sags in your puss and improve your rear end."

"Where are they?"

"Who?"

"My wife and Flowerpot."

"His place in Mirabilis Canyon."

Norm shook his head. "I can't accept this notion."

Shrugging, the wizard stood up. "Excuse me a sec, Norm," he said. "Don't get in my way, Udolpho. Shoo." He made his way, weaving some, to a large, dark wood chest under the window. Crouching, his joints giving out creaking noises, he tugged up the carved, gilded lid and thrust a hand inside. "Here we are." He returned to the table, jiggling a bottle of capsules in his hand.

"Mildred promised no pills."

"These are for me, lad." After struggling with the cap for a moment, he got it off and shook three large bluish capsules into his palm. "Zombex."

"That's a painkiller, isn't it?"

"You can use it for that, sure. Me, I'm hooked on the stuff just now—But that's not your problem." He swallowed the capsules dry, coughed, winced. After a vigorous shake of his head, he yanked open the magic book. "Okay, let's get to this spell. Oh, and keep in mind, lad, that nothing is going to happen for several hours probably. After leaving here, I suggest you get back to your manse in Beverly Hills and merely sit and wait. By no later than midnight, you'll be a new man."

"Do you happen to know Mr. Flowerpot's address?" asked Norm.

Norm' s car, its battery functioning perfectly now, broke down for some altogether different reason about a quarter-mile short of Mr. Flowerpot's hillside estate. He was able to guide the dying Mercedes off the narrow quirky road and onto a patch of dry grass next to a stand of pepper trees.

He sat there, frowning out at the late afternoon. The waning day had been growing increasingly hazy during the past few minutes. Now everything was looking awfully fuzzy, the trees, the brush, the red tile roof of the big house across the way. The sky had become a thick grey blur.

His respiratory system had not been functioning all that well since he departed the seedy Santa Monica apartment of the Amazing Rumhauser. And his skin, especially on his face and hands, felt both hot and itchy.

"A side effect?" Norm wondered as he rested in his car, taking shallow, panting breaths. "But a side effect of what?"

He'd felt absolutely nothing when the old wizard, looking woozy and slurring his speech, had cast the spell on him. Norm had been pretty certain at the time that absolutely nothing had actually happened. He

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wrote, reluctantly, the $1500 down-payment check that Rumhauser requested. But he insisted on a receipt, intending, if he could figure out how to do it without looking too much like an idiot, to report the doddering mystic for being a total charlatan.

Now, however, he was wondering if the spell really was starting to take hold. He patted his chin with the top of his hand. "A little less sag maybe?"

Just then he was visited by severe stomach cramps. Wincing, groaning, he tipped forward, knocking his head against the steering wheel. The hazy condition of the outside world seemed to come spilling into the Mercedes. A great blur engulfed him.

His skin, over every inch of his body, heated up. He commenced itching in so many spots that it was impossible to scratch at all of them.

Norm then had the impression he was taking a sudden, fast elevator ride down and down. Darkness surrounded him and then huge jumbles of heavy cloth began falling down atop him.

He yelled, but only a tiny piping noise came out of him.

Strong odors were swirling around him. A soapy smell, a reek of pines, an awful blend of burning leather and spoiled cheese.

He stumbled around, discovered he was walking on a soft, saggy surface, sinking into it, bouncing now and then. Breathing was much easier now, but that wasn't much of a consolation.

He sat down, putting his hands over his head to keep the huge stretches of cloth from settling down too tightly on him. Gradually he identified the strong smells he was wallowing in. Laundry detergent and deodorant were predominant, mingled with perspiration and old socks.

"Jesus," he exclaimed aloud in his tiny squeak of a voice. "I must have shrunk."

He'd been downsized, drastically, he realized, and was way down inside his own clothes.

"That's absolutely great," he said, trying to walk and make his way to an exit. A sleeve opening or his collar ought to provide a way out. "That old bastard really modified my flesh. Zonked on Zombex and lord knows what else. I should've known he'd futz up the damned spell."

Some ten minutes later, by jogging, rolling and tumbling, climbing and doing a variation on the frog kick, he was standing, naked and, he estimated, less than six inches high, on top of his jacket, trousers and other items of haberdashery on the seat of his car.

Way up above him hung the stained grey ceiling and far to his right loomed the lunch box. It was much bigger than he was and the odor of Sally Jane's latest concoction was annoyingly pronounced.

Sitting there between him and the dented box was his phone, which was the same size as he was, only heavier.

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Angry, he crawled down the sprawl of clothes and straddled the phone. Pushing the buttons with his finger had no effect, but by punching at them, he was able to tap out Rumhauser's number. He shinnied up to the earpiece.

The phone rang four times, very loudly, and then Rumhauser's voice came booming out. "You've reached the palatial residence of the Amazing Rumhauser. I can't come to the phone just now, folks, but it—"

"Shit!" Norm turned, careful not to sit on any of the buttons, and struggled down to the other end of his phone. When he heard the beep, he yelled into the mouthpiece. "Listen to me, you son of a bitch! This is Norm Keenan. I've shrunk! I am now teeny-weeny. You better come up with a god damned spell to reverse this or I'm going to sue your ass good!"

Norm tried his agent next and got her tape. He didn't bother to leave a message. He couldn't immediately think of anyone else to contact.

He was reluctant to try 911. You couldn't very well tell them you'd been reduced to the height of a Perrier bottle because of a misapplied magic spell. Nobody would believe that. Even if they did, they'd probably send reporters along with the ambulance. *Fading Star Shrinks to Size of Your Average Penis*, publications like the *National Intruder* would crow. Nope, that wouldn't be smart.

"Sally Jane," he said in his flutey voice. "She'll help out." She knew he was somewhat vain about his looks and would understand his consulting with a wizard who practiced black magic. She'd been, after all, taking a yoga class for months.

But she wasn't home. She was rolling in the sheets with Mr. Flowerpot.

No, wait. That was only what that phony screwball Rumhauser claimed.

Except now it didn't look as though Rumhauser was a phony. After all, it had taken real magic to do this to Norm.

Even so, he tried his home number.

All that got him was the answering tape and his own voice requesting that he leave a message after the beep.

"What a great voice I had," he lamented forlornly.

He struggled over and sat atop his clothes, thinking for awhile. He glanced over at the control panel next to the phone. One of those toggles would open the windows.

If he could open the window on his side, he ought to be able to climb up and out. Then he could hike to Mr. Flowerpot's place and find out if his wife was there or not.

He snapped his tiny fingers, brightening. "Two birds with one stone," he piped.

He'd be able to find out if she was really fooling around with that skin-

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ny folk singer. And if she was there, he'd stow away in her car and get home that way.

Norm didn't figure he'd confront her at Mr. Flowerpot's. A cuckolded husband who stands less than six inches high and has a voice like Mickey Mouse wouldn't make much of an impression. Oh, he might scare the hell out of them for a minute or two, but then they'd laugh. And Flowerpot might even get the idea to step on him.

Norm began making his way over to the controls.

Night had fallen by the time Norm slipped between two of the wrought-iron bars of the huge gate in the high stone wall surrounding the estate of Willis Gummertz. That was Mr. Flowerpot's actual name.

Naked, bruised and scratched, Norm made his way across the rough white gravel and up onto the half acre of lawn. He still had quite a walk before he hit the house. Prior to quitting his disabled Mercedes, Norm had fashioned himself a sarong out of his pocket handkerchief. But he'd lost that diving into some kind of prickly scrub brush to avoid a swooping crow. The bruises, some of them, he got scrambling over a fallen log to avoid a couple of curious, and far from cute, chipmunks.

"When does this guy have his lawn mowed?" he wondered as he trudged up the steep incline through the shoulder-high grass.

He was wheezing, producing small harmonica noises out of his little chest, from the exertions of his long, arduous hike. If any other plan had occurred to him en route, he'd have given up the idea of spying on Mr. Flowerpot in his glass and redwood mansion.

There were apparently no pets in residence. He got to the front porch finally and was able to get inside the house by squeezing under the generous gap at the bottom of the front door.

He found himself in a immense, dim-lit hallway. The pile of the mustard-colored carpeting came up over his ankles, slowing him down as he worked his way cautiously further into the house.

From up above somewhere came booming laughter. "Willie, don't. That's enough," roared a female voice.

Was that Sally Jane?

Norm trotted toward the stairway.

"But, shucks, hon, it's sure now fun aticklin' you."

Flowerpot. That was Mr. Flowerpot and, Christ, the guy talked in that sodkicker style offcamera, too.

"No, really, let me get dressed," begged Norm's wife. "I have to get home pretty soon or Sappo'll get suspicious."

Sappo? Norm kicked up his pace, running now across the vast stretch of carpet to the first step of the stairs. That was him, apparently, Sappo.

"Heck, darlin', that husband of yourn ain't got no more sense than a lop-eared ol' mule. He ain't never gonna get wise to us."

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"C'mon, hand me my bra. Don't do that."

Norm caught the edge of the first step and, grimly, lips pressed tight, pulled himself up to the second.

By the time he reached the landing, he was panting and both his tiny arms were sore.

He caught his breath and started jogging along the hall, staying close to the wall. He had figured out where the voices were coming from.

As he neared the slightly opened door of the bedroom, Norm slowed. Watchful, he eased slowly along, his tiny back pressed against the wallpaper.

"It would be, you know, wonderful if Sappo got that part on Snickerson's new series," said Sally Jane. "It would really keep him out of the way."

"He ain't got a chance in Hell, sugar." An enormous clapping sound followed.

"Don't pat me on the behind while I'm putting on pantyhose, Willie. Stop it."

Mr. Flowerpot chuckled. "Now, iffen I wanted a part with ol' Snickerson, I wouldn't have me no trouble at all."

"Why's that?"

"Oh, down in my ol' rolltop desk I happen to have some photographs that that feller don't want nobody else to know about." He chuckled again.

"How interesting."

Yeah, that was interesting.

Slowly, holding his breath, Norm slipped around the door jamb. He sank nearly to his knees in this carpet, which was a dark watermelon shade.

Across the room, rising up into the air, stood his wife, nearly dressed. Beside her rose Mr. Flowerpot, the favorite folk singer of millions of preschoolers across the land, clad in yellow overalls and a checkered shirt. He was barefooted.

Moving with extreme caution, being careful not to make any ripples in the pile of the rug, Norm went over to the closet. The door was partially open. He dived inside, rested on the toe of a pair of fleecy slippers and peered out into the pinklit master bedroom.

"Lemme get my clodhoppers, hon, an' then we'll mosey off to tie on the ol' feedbag."

"No, honestly, I can't. Even Sappo will get suspicious if I'm that late."

"Okay, sugar. But we sure enough got us time for a brew down at the Sheepdip Saloon, ain't we?"

"Just one."

Heavy footfalls shook the room.

The door of the closet was yanked open wide. Light came blaring in.

Norm, who'd suspected what was coming, had dived inside the slipper. He stayed there, hunched down, unmoving.

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A huge hand came in and grabbed up a pair of ornate leather boots.
The entire closet rattled when Mr. Flowerpot slammed the door shut.
After a moment, Norm ventured out into the open again.
There wasn't enough room under this door for him to slide out.
"Damn," he observed sadly, "I'm marooned in this bastard's closet."

It took Norm an hour at least—maybe longer, since his watch hadn't shrunk down with him—to push and drag the shoe boxes he'd discovered at the dusty back of the dark closet over under the doorknob, then stack and climb them.

The knob was only two feet from the floor, but getting up there was a considerable chore for Norm in his present diminutive condition.

The tower of shoe boxes was shaky, swaying quite a bit as he worked his way up it. When Norm finally reached the brass knob, he faced the new problem of getting the damned thing to turn. He put both arms around it, gave a squeaky grunt and tried to twist.

The huge knob didn't budge.

He was asking himself, "Am I turning in the right direction?" when he started to feel enormously hot.

The closet seemed to all at once turn into a runaway sauna and the incredible itch revisited him.

The shoe boxes collapsed under his weight as he banged his head against a dangling wooden coat hanger. Three flowerpot hats fell off an overhead shelf.

"I'm back," he realized. His voice was its deep, convincing self once again.

Grabbing the knob firmly, he turned it and pushed the door open.

Norm stepped, naked, out into the master bedroom.

Mr. Flowerpot had been walking toward the closet. He stopped dead, staring. "Who the dickens are you, fella?"

Norm had learned dirty fighting for his role as the crooked cop in *Street Kill III.* He charged forward, jabbed Flowerpot hard in the lower belly, kneed the crotch of his yellow overalls and then delivered three nasty chops to his throat as he started to wobble.

The folk singer slammed to the floor and started to sink into oblivion.

Norm crouched and introduced himself. "I'm Sappo," he said.

When he got around to looking at himself in a mirror, which he did as he was exiting Mr. Flowerpot's mansion in a pair of borrowed overalls, Norm discovered that he was slimmer in body and firmer of face. That ought to help him in his upcoming interview with Snickerson at Dynamo. As should the packet of photos of the producer that Norm had borrowed from a cubbyhole in Flowerpot's rolltop desk. Even in a wide-open community like Hollywood you couldn't do what Snickerson was doing in these pictures.

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Norm whistled as he hiked back down to his car, in a pair of tight borrowed boots, to wait for the tow truck he summoned on Mr. Flowerpot's phone. His career, he was certain, was ready for an upswing.

And he was right about that.

Mildred had only to show Snickerson the top photo in the pile to persuade him to sign Norm to a regular role in his new series, *Domestic Relations*. The feisty agent also persuaded the Amazing Rumhauser to come up with a new spell for Norm, one that allowed him to control any spells of shrinking that might attack him. With a little practice, Norm learned how to grow and shrink at will. That proved extremely useful in his career. He was able to slip in and out of just about any mansion in the Greater Los Angeles area, no matter how sophisticated its security system. He gathered up all sorts of interesting material and information on the topseeded producers, directors and actors. Information that Mildred was able to parlay into lucrative acting assignments for him.

His home life improved as well. He never confided in Sally Jane that he had the ability to shrink. But he did mention that he didn't mind her seeing Mr. Flowerpot now and then, provided he didn't have to sample any more of her gourmet meals. He also suggested that it was time she bought him a new Mercedes. He wasn't going to need a new lunch box. Sally Jane went along with his requests and, quite soon, decided she was tired of Flowerpot.

By the following spring, Norm was one of the most sought-after actors in the business. There was even talk of his costarring with Mel Gibson in the musical remake of *The Prisoner of Zenda*.

He was stretched out on the sun-drenched patio of their Beverly Hills place, skimming through a nineteenth-century life of Count Monstrodamus one April afternoon, when his agent phoned with yet another job suggestion.

"This is a terrific idea," she began.

"What is?"

"Grandma's Kitchen—you know, that Japanese conglomerate that just bought out Universal Foodstuff—is thinking of doing a series of very expensive commercials featuring Rudy the Hot Dog."

Norm said, "I don't want to do the voice of a weenie, Mildred."

"Hear me out, schmuck," she suggested. "They've been working with a puppet animation outfit and aren't happy with the results."

"Wait now."

"If we dressed you up, after you've shrunk down, in a hot dog costume, you could do one hell of a job."

"C'mon, that's beneath my . . ." Norm paused, gazing out toward the glittering blue water of the swimming pool. "But how much do you think we can make off this?" ●

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Mark W. Tiedemann

RUST CASTLES

Mark W. Tiedemann's last story for *Asimov's*, "Drink," appeared in our July 1994 issue. Since then, he's sold three novels in his Secantis Sequence. The first book, *Compass Reach*, will be out from White Wolf in June. In his latest tale, Mr. Tiedemann takes a jolting look at the unsettling road down which our current-day policies may be headed.

Cory stared out the car window at the passing farmscape. Wheat, corn, soy, wheat, corn, soy. No mountains. Amber waves but no purple majesty. She smiled wryly, glimpsing her reflection briefly in the window as the road turned and the angle of the light changed. She had gained weight since leaving Nebraska. Mom would be pleased.

"It's beautiful."

Cory looked at Tal. Both hands on the wheel—wide hands, pronounced knuckles—a whimsical smile on his long face as if he were surprised that everything she had told him about her home was, after all, true. He glanced at her and the smile widened.

"And I really did grow up in a two-story white house with gables and a screened porch that wrapped around two sides," she said and tugged playfully at his ear. He laughed.

"Nebraska," he said, nodding. Only in the "r" did his accent come through, a vague roll that Cory found attractive.

"Nebraska." She looked ahead, at the road, farms on either side, sky infinite over all, and shifted in the seat. Seven hours on the road this last stretch. A sign came toward them, letters changing from glyphs to read: Bennington 10 KM. Cory blinked, startled by a sudden spike of worry. Fucking Nebraska, she thought, and snaked a hand across to Tal's thigh.

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Bennington began where the national interlink station rose out of the middle of an unplanted field. The screen on the dashboard displayed "Welcome to Bennington, population 1206" for a few seconds before a map of the town scrolled up. Cory tapped it lightly.

"There," she said.

Tal nodded. "You're sure you don't want to stop somewhere else first?"

"No. No, I'm not sure, but no, I don't want to stop anywhere else."

"As always, get the difficult part over with first?"

When Cory did not answer, Tal drove through town in silence. He skirted the center, took the indicated turn, and for a few more kilometers they saw no other structures, only crops.

The road veered to the right, climbed a ripple in the earth, and suddenly Cory saw the house. Her heart squeezed hard, twice, three times. She breathed deeply, forced herself to be calm, and nearly managed it by the time Tal stopped on the car pad. She gave his thigh a final affectionate squeeze and stepped out.

For nearly a minute she saw nothing but her home. White, tall, vaguely gothic, it imposed itself on the landscape beyond, an improbable icon of domesticity. Six years away, in New Philadelphia, and the anachronism struck her solidly. Curiously, she felt proud of its resistance to time. She took it in like the sight of an old friend or a new lover, all at once, seeing only the essential whole.

The gutters needed cleaning badly. One of the porch screens was torn nearly from top to bottom. Cory frowned. Some of the siding was loose, warped. Weeds clustered along the foundation. She turned to look at the other buildings and caught her breath at the sight of the collapsed tool shed.

Tal stood by the car, hand on the roof, one foot still inside. His whimsical smile was replaced by one of puzzlement; his eyebrows pulled together in concern.

Cory went to the front door. A big security lock covered the knob.

"What the hell. . . ?"

"Attention!"

Cory jumped back, turned. A robot rolled around the corner of the house and came toward her. Squat, armored, Cory recognized the all-terrain design of a security monitor. A red light flashed on its crown.

"Attention! You are trespassing! Present identification or face compulsory penalty under section 915-Kay of Agricultural Recovery Act!"

Cory pulled her ID from her jacket. The robot came to a stop a meter from her and she slipped the card into its reader. She glanced over her shoulder toward the car: Tal was gone.

"Pulham, Corine H., current residence twenty-one level ten, Thames Tower, New Philadelphia."

"Correct," Cory answered. The card extruded and she retrieved it. "My family owns this property."

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"Incorrect. Property has been attached by Nebraska Division of National Resource Allocations Administration. Concede nonawareness of status. Prosecution and penalties waived."

"Attached?" Cory looked up at the house. Her room had been that one, there on the second floor, furthest to the left. She remembered watching the field robots work the harvests from there. "What happened to my parents? When did this happen?"

"Attachment effective 10-18-22. Further information unavailable from this unit."

"Damn. Where do I go for further information?"

"County NRAA offices."

"Permission to look around?"

"Denied. Approval of regional NRAA director required. Request that you now leave. Prosecutory protocols will be administered in case of noncompliance."

Cory returned to the car. Tal huddled low against the passenger door, below the window. She got in and started the car, staring coldly at the robot, then pulled out and headed for town.

An NRAA commodities distribution warehouse dominated the center of town. A post office, two restaurants, a tavern, a *Continental Cyberlog* distributor/service station, the NIH clinic, and civic admin building all looked small and disordered beside the hulking grey federal structure. Without the CDW Bennington would have been—had once been—like the thousands of small rural villages that lacked the urban cohesion to mark it as a town without needing a sign telling everyone so.

Cory pulled into an angled space in front of the admin building. Tal yawned and opened his door.

"I'm going to get a cup of coffee," he said. "Or do you want me to come in with you?"

"That wouldn't be a good idea. No. Besides, this is . . ." She laughed caustically. "I was going to say this is family business, but it really isn't."

"Isn't it?"

Cory shrugged. "I'll join you when I'm done."

At the top of the wide steps she looked back to see Tal crossing the street toward one of the restaurants—Rose and Sally's—and wished for a moment that he could have come with her. Tal had an intuitive sense of how bureaucracies functioned, which was the reason he had yet to be caught and deported as an illegal. But then that was exactly why she did not want him with her now.

The lobby was chilly. To the left were rows of interface stations to the national interlink, all unoccupied. To the right was the licensing office. Through the glass doors Cory saw one employee, sitting at her station reading a magazine. Directly ahead was the information desk. Cory smiled.

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"Mr. Bishop."

The old man looked up, narrowed his eyes briefly, then nodded. "Cory Pulham. You've been gone six years."

"Guilty as charged."

He shook his head. "No charges. Just a fact. Probably a good thing, all in all. I suppose you've been out to your old place?"

"That's why I'm here."

"Mmm. Suspected as much. I suppose you know it's been absorbed?"

"The security robot wasn't overly informative."

"No, guess it wouldn't be. Well, you can go on upstairs and see a man named Cadeford—he's the local NRAA agent in charge of such things—but it's a done deed. All he'll tell you is that production fell below contract levels without the likelihood that they'd come back up, so under the law the farm was attached."

"It didn't appear any farming was being done."

"Probably isn't."

"Cadeford?"

"Top of the stairs, to your left, fourth door on the right."

Cory nodded. "I'll get the official version first, Mr. Bishop. Then you can tell me what really happened."

"You left, that's what happened."

Cory winced, but ignored the comment. Later, she thought, I can deal with my part later.

* * *

Cadeford's eyes watered. "New contacts," he explained, laughed, and gestured her to sit.

"Have you considered surgery?"

"No, no. I have problems with lasers and things like that." He wiped his eyes once more, then folded his hands on the desk. "How can I help you, Ms. Pulham?"

"I want to know what happened to my parents' farm. I went out there earlier expecting to find my home. Instead I'm greeted by a security robot."

"Yes. You did have proper ID? There are no violations filed against you?"

"No, I have ID." She fished it out and tossed it onto the desk.

Cadeford inserted it into a small reader, then returned it. "Yes, the property was absorbed by the regional combine back in October."

"Why?"

"Mr. Pulham's production fell below contract quotas."

"What contract?"

"The NRAA regional combine contract."

"My father swore he'd never agree to one of those."

"He evidently changed his mind. In fact, he signed on in June of '20. To

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be fair, our terms were generous. The United States had just concluded a new GATT with Ukraine and the Siberian Confederation, prices were up, and it was a good time for independents like your father to come on board."

"Not if he ended up losing his farm. What happened?"

"I'm not really sure, Ms. Pulham. But after maintaining excellent delivery schedules for the balance of '20 and most of '21 there was a sudden drop—40 percent, in fact—which was still above the agreed quota, but production declined steadily until August of '22 when attachment proceedings were commenced. At that time the Pulham farm was delivering less than 30 percent of the contract requirement."

"It looks to me as if no farming is being done now."

"That's not my jurisdiction. What the resources people do after attachment is—"

"May I have copies of the pertinent documents?"

He blinked. "I assure you, Ms. Pulham, everything was legal and perfectly open."

"I'm sure it was. But I'd still like to see what happened. I've been gone a few years. This wasn't the homecoming I expected."

"I understand." He typed instructions quickly into his keyboard. A few seconds later a disk extruded, which he handed to her.

"Thank you, Mr. Cadeford. Now, is there any way I might reacquire the property? I mean, should I be interested in it?"

"Well, that's unusual to say the least. Once attached, properties remain part of the regional combine."

"Would you mind looking into it? You see, I wasn't informed about the attachment, and as a member of the family I think I was entitled to challenge the attachment."

"Oh," he frowned, then nodded thoughtfully. "I see what you mean. Of course, I'll look into it."

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Cadeford."

Another man, younger and one she did not recognize, sat behind the information desk. "Where's Mr. Bishop?"

He pointed vaguely toward the entrance. "Over at the lizzies' place."

"You mean Rose and Sally's?"

He stared at her blankly for a moment. "That's what I said."

Evening was imminent, the late afternoon tossing long shadows off everything in its way. Cory paused at the entrance to Rose and Sally's to look down the length of mainstreet Bennington. For a few seconds she felt wistful, almost sad, by what seemed lost in the town. The quality Cory missed, though, the town had never possessed, but it was possible to imagine it so, either before she had been born or along some alternate path not taken. The sharp light set Bennington aglow with a luminosity it could not itself produce.

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She turned and entered the old restaurant.

"Gods be damned, it's true!"

The hardwood floor creaked under Sally's heavy tread as she came out of the shadows from behind the long bar. She enveloped Cory in her arms and squeezed. Cory's nostrils filled with the scent of bacon, paprika, and mint. She hugged the big woman back, feeling for the first time welcome.

"Harry said it was you," Sally announced, turning to look to the table where Mr. Bishop sat with Tal. "But I don't always believe Harry."

"No reason you should," Mr. Bishop said. "I only tell the truth all the time, that's no recommendation."

"Like hell," Sally laughed. "Are you hungry? Your friend said you've been on the road all day."

The years of cooking had embedded a combined odor into the walls of the place, a smell that instantly triggered hunger. "As a matter of fact . . ."

Sally, laughing, waved her toward the table. "I know just what you want. Sit."

Cory watched Sally go behind the bar and fill a large white mug from an enormous coffee urn.

"Hey, isn't that ours?" Cory stopped at the bar and pointed to the urn. It made at least fifty cups at a time, its once-bright surface stained from years of use.

Sally set the cup before her. "Yep. Your mom gave it to us after . . . well, after."

"That thing was in the tool shed since I could remember." She picked up the cup. "I didn't think it worked anymore."

She drifted back to the table, a warm nostalgia working on her. Tal watched her as she sat down. He smiled, but she noted the nervous way he narrowed his eyes. She patted his hand.

"I suppose you've met Mr. Bishop? He used to be the postmaster. Then he got elected sheriff—"

"Two terms," Mr. Bishop said, nodding.

"—and mayor."

"One term."

Tal nodded appreciatively. "And now?"

"Hand out pamphlets to tourists, those we get, and the rest of the time tell people which office to go to for what bureaucrat to yell at."

Tal laughed quietly.

Mr. Bishop studied him closely for a few seconds, then looked at Cory. "How did your interview with Agent Cadeford go?"

"About what you might expect. Production on the farm fell, contract violation allowed the combine to absorb the land. It's not being worked, though."

"No robots," Mr. Bishop said. "Still waiting for the allocation from Lincoln."

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"What about the robots Dad had?"

"Reassigned."

"All eighteen?"

"There were only six when the attachment went into effect."

Cory stared at him. "Where are my parents?"

Mr. Bishop pursed his lips and looked down at his coffee cup. Sally edged up to the table then with another cup, which she set before Tal. The big woman laid a hand on Cory's shoulder.

"Lincoln," she said. "Your dad had a stroke. He's in a home."

Cory looked up at Sally. "When?"

"About five months ago."

"Nobody told me. Nobody sent word."

Sally looked embarrassed and patted Cory a few times, then returned to the kitchen. Mr. Bishop continued gazing into his coffee. Cory waited for him to add to the revelations, but he remained silent, and soon she found herself staring into space. She was startled by Tal's touch. He squeezed her hand gently.

"We should go to Lincoln," he said.

Cory hated the smell of hospitals and nursing homes; retirement hospices, as this one was called, were little better.

The public menu gave her a room number and a map of the complex, then informed her that the requested occupants had at present no visitors.

"I'll wait," Tal said. He glanced at the security robot, then smiled at Cory. "There's a cafeteria."

"You've been spending a lot of time in restaurants and cafeterias since—"

He raised a finger. "I'll write a travel guide when we're through. 'Riding the Underground Food Stop to Food Stop.' "

"The title kind of gives it away, doesn't it?"

He shrugged and motioned for her to go on. She watched him drift to the cafeteria, then turned and headed for the elevators.

Cory followed the map down wide corridors of sound-absorbing carpet and pastel walls lined with identical doors. She passed by windows that overlooked small open-air spaces where retirees gathered to meet or be alone beneath the sky. She shuddered involuntarily. Robots drifted along on mundane errands. By the time she found the right door she had seen only one other visitor.

The door opened.

"Cory. . . ?"

"Hi, Mom."

Estelle Pulham was a head shorter than Cory, but somehow never seemed to be looking up at anyone. Her greying brown hair hugged her wide skull, framing a finely carved, intelligent face, a face Cory had often

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wished she had inherited instead of her father's longer, more solemn countenance. Estelle wore a pale yellow jumpsuit and slippers that set off her sun-browned skin.

She stared at Cory for several seconds, until a robot glided by.

"Come in."

The size of the apartment surprised Cory.

"Four rooms," Estelle said, anticipating the question. "Living room, kitchen, two bedrooms. Bathrooms, of course, but they never count them as rooms."

"Two bedrooms?"

"One's full of biomedical equipment."

"Oh."

Cory stopped in the living room. Comfortable sofa, two big chairs, photographs on the wall over the sofa, and a cable access in the corner. She folded her arms and turned to her mother.

"No one told me, Mom."

Estelle folded her arms, mirroring Cory. "No one intended to."

"You were just going to let him die and not tell me?"

"Oh, I suppose I'd have invited you to the funeral." She shrugged. "Far as I'm concerned he's already dead. Want to go in and have a look? You'd hardly know it was him."

Cory squeezed her lips tight, held back the quick barb she found ready.

"What happened?" she asked. "I went by the farm."

"Did you go talk to the people at the NRAA?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then you know what happened. Production fell—"

"—below contract levels, yes, dammit, I know that part. In fact I read the official transcripts on the way here, I got a copy from the NRAA agent. I'm good with government legalese, but damned if I could spot one loophole. But I don't know why it happened. Mr. Bishop said you only had six units at the end."

Estelle grunted. "The robot was supposed to set us free. . . ."

"Mom."

"Your sister got married two, two-and-a-half years ago. Some idiot who spent all his money, then all hers, and when they were thoroughly broke your father offered him a job. He refused and next thing we know Doris was demanding transfer of her automated surrogate rights. There went three units right there. In the meantime Paul left—didn't even discuss it, just left us a note and took off. We got word that he was caught in the labor draft and we lost *his* surrogate rights. Another three units gone. Right after you left we leased three to Max Sutter."

She suddenly dropped her arms and shuffled wearily to a chair. In seconds she became small, puzzled, and Cory's scalp tingled.

"Sutter worked them to ruin. We had to bring suit to get him to pay for

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replacements. That was the worst thing we could have done. NRAA showed up to reassess and determined that those three units had technically been yours. Since we'd leased them out without your permission, we owed you three, and since you no longer lived with us and there was no formal lease agreement between us, we lost three more. Twelve units in three years, gone. Not long after that he collapsed. He was trying to rebuild the old combine to go out and work the fields himself."

"I never heard a word, not from the NRAA, not from the Association of Machine Surrogates, and not from you. I didn't know any of this was going on. I sure didn't receive notification of transfer of surrogate rights." Cory shook her head and tightened her fingers on her arms.

"Oh, if you ever needed them and filed you'd probably have found out then that you already had them."

"I didn't intend any of this."

Estelle gave her a curious look and laughed sharply. "So how about the part you *did* intend? What's life like as—what do they call it now?—an urban monadist? It used to be called a city planner."

"It still is, officially." Cory shrugged. "It's good."

"Then why'd you come back?"

"Do I get any slack here? We haven't seen each other in over six years."

Estelle did not flinch, but rather studied Cory from a place Cory wished to find. Her mother always reasoned things through, never made conclusions hastily, sloppily. Estelle was a careful woman. When she was small, Cory often thought her mother part angel, which explained her evident detachment from the things that made everyone else angry and careless. Cory did not remember clearly when awe had changed to contempt—when she turned thirteen perhaps, certainly by fourteen—but she never lost her envy.

"You're in trouble," Estelle said.

Cory ran down the options of what to tell her mother. None of them seemed riskworthy. She opened her mouth, not sure what she would say.

"Mom . . . I didn't want to be a farmer."

"You made that abundantly clear."

"You had no right getting angry at me for it."

For the first time Estelle's eyes shifted away from Cory. She nodded. "True. But you had no right being such a bitch about it. You hurt both of us and you knew you were hurting us."

"You wouldn't let up."

"Habit." She looked at Cory again. "You went to the farm because you're in trouble. You want help. Most natural thing in the world, to come home. I suppose I should be pleased, but circumstances aren't exactly ideal for a prodigal return."

Cory sighed and stood. "I'm sorry."

"Where are you going?"

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"Back to Bennington. See what I can salvage."

Estelle started. "Of what?"

"The farm."

"Why? You hate the farm."

"No." Cory stabbed the air with a finger, a downward gesture she used in meetings when she had come to a decision and no longer wished dissent. "No, I never hated the farm. I hated what you told me it ought to be. I already knew what it was for me and I hated being told it was something else."

"That's the little girl in you talking."

"That's right." She glanced toward the closed bedroom door. "I'm sorry about all this."

She reached the apartment door.

"Cory . . ."

"Yes, Mom?"

"What was it for you? The farm, I mean."

"Escape."

Estelle nodded vaguely, seeming in a small measure to affirm Cory's answer. "We should talk more."

Cory nodded and stepped into the corridor.

"Just proves that with the best intentions," Tal said wearily, "human beings will find a way to fuck themselves."

Cory stared ahead at the night road. The rain earlier left it sleek and gleaming in her headlights. She had thought Tal asleep, but suddenly he began talking. Grumbling, mostly, and she recognized the nervous impulse behind it.

"I mean," he continued, "look at the solution to a classic problem of worker-management relations, the ownership of labor. America comes to the conclusion that this fundamentally conflicting situation is at the root of poverty and unemployment and many of the sins of modern economic life and arrives at a novel solution. You enact a constitutional amendment designating labor as a property right. Incredible! In one stroke of legal brilliance you place employee and manager on equal footing! And in the next breath you destroy the intent by declaring that the government may exercise eminent domain over labor. Constitutionally sanctioned slavery!"

"The robot was supposed to free us," Cory said wistfully. She had listened to Tal's rants many times. He worked things through verbally when he was anxious.

He grunted. "Of course. But it just turned everyone who had one—or the limit, three—into petty capitalists. Why the limit? I never understood that."

"It seemed fair at the time. Limit unfair competition."

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"Hmm."

"Corporations weren't allowed to own robots, but the definition of a corporation was too loose, so we redefined *kinds* of corporations. Three robots, you were still an individual, even if incorporated. Four you weren't."

"Complicated."

The Bennington sign swept by. A few last drops of rain danced over the windshield. Cory drove through town, made the turn, and parked across from the farm. In her mirror she saw the eastern sky beginning to lighten.

She stared past Tal at the house, its hulking silhouette barely visible. Now and then a small red ember moved through the darkness: the security robot.

"I used to imagine I was Dorothy," she said. "That side of the road was Kansas and this side was Oz."

After a long silence Tal breathed, "America. Huh."

"I'm sorry, Tal. I thought—"

He laid a hand on her knee. "It's okay. I know what you thought. It was a good idea. Maybe. You had one good idea, maybe you have more."

"I could still try to get you into Canada."

"Canada would be okay, but I don't think you could get me through."

"Maybe we should have stayed in New Philadelphia, you might have gotten hooked up with the Pipeline." Cory did not really know that much about the underground, except that it moved politicals—labor draft evaders, illegal aliens, free speech radicals, others—about and kept them out of government hands or got them into friendlier countries. The Pipeline had existed in one form or another since the first labor draft almost twenty years ago.

"One more day there," Tal said, "and INS would have had me and I'd be even now on a transport back home. I'm surprised we've come this far without being stopped." He looked at her. "Why did you do this?"

"I love you."

"No. Well, maybe you do, but I don't think so. Not this much."

Cory kept her eyes on the house. "When I was a little girl I remember my parents always helping people out. Strangers. They'd come by the farm, hungry, homeless, my mom and dad took them in, fed them, gave them a place to sleep. For a time I was used to having a dozen people I didn't know always hanging around. Times were hard. My dad always said you should do what you could when you thought it was right. It'd come back eventually, he said." She grunted. "I don't believe that, but I can't forget that they did."

Cory started the car and headed back to Bennington. She was bone tired, her thinking muzzy and unfocused. They could drift from town to town, state to state, until her credit ran out or the car broke down or Tal was finally identified. There was a time, she knew, when the simple ex-

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pedient of marriage would have solved their problem, but that had not been the case since the labor rights amendment.

A light still glowed in Rose and Sally's, though the sign said Closed. Cory rapped lightly on the glass and peered into the dim café. After the third knock, Sally appeared at the kitchen door. She looked like an exaggerated teddy bear wrapped in an old fluffy robe.

Her face changed from impatience to welcome when she came close and recognized Cory.

"You look beat to hell," she said, drawing Cory inside. Tal followed. "Both of you."

"I hate to impose, Sally, but we need a place to sleep."

"You been up all this time?"

"Since early yesterday morning."

Sally gave her a gentle shove toward the kitchen. Cory absently stroked the old coffee urn as she walked by it, a gesture of familiarity, a token for luck. The aroma of soup thickened. Sally had been busy getting ready for the day ahead. Another door opened to the left and gave onto a flight of wide stairs. A reinforced steel bar paralleled the banister all the way up.

At the top of the stairs Sally went first.

"Rosey, we have company. Remember I told you about Cory Pulham? She needs a crash site."

"Cory?"

Cory entered a pleasantly cluttered apartment. A faint odor of sandalwood cut the air. Photographs crowded one wall—rich black-and-white images matted and signed—and personal bric-a-brac lined the mantle above the ancient fireplace. A high-efficiency heater filled the hearth. The carpet was old, the pattern dissolved into unrecognizability.

A faint whirring brought Cory's gaze to the archway into the next room. Rose entered in her power chair. Compared to Sally she was almost toylike. In the six years since Cory had seen her she had grown thinner, but her eyes were still luminous and her smile wide. Cory leaned down to kiss her cheek.

"It's good to see you," Rose said. "Sally told me you were back, but you left so quickly."

"I saw Mother."

"All the way to Lincoln and now you're back? You must be absolutely exhausted."

Cory sat down in a high-backed chair. Despite her weariness she related to the two women everything about the visit. She spoke in monotone, like a recording. When she finished she found a cup of tea on the small table beside her.

"Who's your friend?" Rose asked.

Tal was on the sofa, slumped into its corner, legs stretched out, ankles crossed, asleep. Cory smiled.

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"Antaly Damaganian," Cory said. "He's Armenian. He came here on a political visa. He wrote for an independent newsletter that got shut down. Some of the rest of the staff have already been killed, the others are in prison or hiding."

Rose nodded, gazing at Tal. "He's asking asylum then."

"Asking. Not getting."

Cory wanted to join Tal in sleep, but as the silence continued she felt obligated to explain.

"I'd hoped to put him up at home until something could be arranged."

"So he's an illegal," Rose said. She glanced at Sally. "I understand a bit about that."

Cory remembered then that Rose had come from England originally, before the current immigration restrictions. Her accent was nearly gone. She had been in Bennington since Cory could remember. When Cory was little Rose still helped in the restaurant, getting around carefully, then later with a cane, then two canes, finally a series of power chairs.

"What are you going to do now?" Sally asked.

Cory shrugged and yawned. "Sleep. Later . . ."

"How'd you get involved with him?" Rose asked.

"Cory said she needed sleep," Sally said.

"It's all right," Cory protested. "He was part of a group of politicals—visas and petitions pending—being shown the government at work. They came through my offices when half my staff was out sick with last year's flu. I ended up conducting the tour." She smiled at Tal, remembering. "He asked a lot of questions. I don't know what I was thinking. . . ."

Rose smiled. "Maybe you weren't."

"He's been a lot of trouble."

"Aren't you going out on a limb this way?" Sally asked.

"Odds are good this will cost me my career." She frowned. "It's not right, though. If he goes back he'll die."

Sally grunted. "Where've I heard that before?"

Cory blinked. "Where?"

"You. When you left. You came in, mad as hell, and we talked. Remember?"

"Vaguely. I talked to a lot of people then."

"Mmm, I bet you did. But *I* remember. When I asked you if you had to leave to do what you wanted to do, you said, 'If I stay I'll die.' "

"Different circumstances," Cory said.

"Maybe."

"You don't mind putting us up for a night?"

Sally left the room. Cory was nearly asleep when Sally returned with pillows and blankets.

Cory opened her eyes to Tal's silhouette against morning-pearled win-

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dows at the front of the apartment. His shoulders hunched, his hair stuck out chaotically. Cory smiled, reminded of other mornings in other places.

Sally appeared beside him then and looked out the window for a moment, then moved him off to one side. Cory heard Rose's power chair and quiet words. She sat up and rubbed her eyes. She did not recall the hide-a-bed being opened out or her getting there from the wingback.

Rose wheeled into the room and stopped alongside Cory.

"Police," she said.

Cory stared. "INS?"

"I think so. Look, we can get Tal out. The question is, do you want to go with him?"

"I—"

"Think hard, Cory. If you do you'll never be able to come back."

Two days earlier she knew she would not have hesitated. Yes, go, leave, run off. She hesitated now and it puzzled her. The risk of permanent expatriation did not frighten her—that had been dealt with when she decided to bring Tal home—and as far as she could tell fear had little to do with her present uncertainty.

"We don't have a lot of time," Rose said.

"No," Cory said. "No, I'm staying. Get Tal out if you can." She reached out and grabbed the arm of Rose's chair. "How are you getting him out?"

Rose smiled. "Let me worry that one. The less you know and all that." She scooted away, back to the front of the apartment.

A few minutes later Tal, dressed, came in and sat beside her.

"Thank you," he said. "I'll try to let you know—"

"I know you will." She squeezed his hand, smiling hard to show him that she was all right and to keep herself from saying more. "Go."

"You're good, Cory. Thank you."

He hurried away. Cory heard sounds from another part of the apartment, more voices, then stillness. After a while she went to the front windows and looked down into the morning-lit street. Three dark blue cars clustered before the civic admin building, county sheriff ATV on one side and a grey NRAA car on the other.

As she watched, a group of uniformed people emerged from the building and descended the steps. Mr. Bishop was among them. He pointed out Cory's car. The federal officers nodded, glanced up at the windows. A moment later they started across the street.

The cell door slid open. Mr. Bishop peered in and waved for her to follow. Cory stood and smoothed down her paper jumpsuit as best she could, then stepped into the bare white corridor.

"Lucky," Mr. Bishop said.

Cory said nothing. She accompanied him through two more sets of heavy doors and out into a glass-walled office area. A technician moni-

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tored a console, watching a bank of screens showing occupied cells. Most of the inmates were stretched out on the narrow fold-down cots.

Beside the technician, Agent Cadeford stood with a plainclothes INS agent. Cory recognized him as the one who had cited her rights and handcuffed her, but she did not remember his name. He looked at her blankly for a few seconds, then handed a diskette to Cadeford and left.

"Sorry for the inconvenience, Ms. Pulham," Cadeford said. He seemed slightly embarrassed. He touched the technician's shoulder. "Get her her things."

The man nodded wordlessly and left the office.

"We're withdrawing charges," Cadeford said.

"Why?" Cory asked.

"I'd just count my blessings and be still," Mr. Bishop said.

Cory glared at him and he turned away.

The technician returned with Cory's clothes sealed in clear plastic bags. He gestured to a small room where she could change. When she emerged only Mr. Bishop remained. He handed her the diskette.

"I'll buy you a cup of coffee," he said.

He led her out of the jail section into more familiar corridors of the civic admin building. Mr. Bishop waved at the woman behind the information counter, who waved back. Cory followed him across the street to Rose and Sally's. Only one INS car remained on the street and the sheriff was long gone. They had held her for two days. She glanced back at the building and suppressed a shudder.

"They didn't have enough to make a case," Mr. Bishop said. "Not that they didn't try, but when all the arguing was done they figured what they had just wouldn't hold up."

"I suppose they let you in on all this?"

"Oh, nobody pays much attention to a relic like me. I didn't get invited to participate in the meetings, but they didn't go out of their way to hide anything from me."

Cory shook her head. A number of replies came to mind, but none without a cutting sarcasm she did not wish to use on Mr. Bishop.

He opened the door for her and she walked through.

Estelle Pulham sat at a table with Sally.

Cory tucked her hands in her pockets and waited for her mother to speak first. An old game, it shocked her that she still played it. Somehow, though, it seemed perfectly normal to find Estelle here, like this. Like the old coffee urn she fit with Sally, the restaurant, the situation.

Estelle sighed tiredly. "Sit down, Cory. Please."

Cory pulled out the chair opposite her mother and sat down. Sally excused herself and Mr. Bishop went with her to the bar.

"You might have told me what kind of trouble you were in," Estelle said.

"Why would I do that? You already thought I was terrible."

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"But you would've just shown up at the farm with the trouble, unannounced. What were you doing coming back here with an illegal?"

"It was—I don't know. It was the only place I could think of to come."

"Why?"

"Maybe I thought you'd help me. I don't know why I thought that, but—I didn't really have anywhere else to go."

"I suppose that's a definition of home. Did it occur to you that we might not help?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact I thought it very likely."

"But you brought him anyway."

Cory looked away impatiently. Sally leaned on the bar, watching, while Mr. Bishop nursed a cup of coffee. Cory felt interrogated. Instead of anger and resentment or welcoming and acceptance, Estelle was questioning her. Rational and careful to a fault, Cory thought.

"You and Dad always took strangers in. Why not me?"

"Hmm. Did you think you could really hide him here?"

"Mom, I don't know what I thought. I just know I couldn't stand aside and let him be deported to a fucking firing squad."

"No, you couldn't do that. Would have gone against everything you ever knew, everything we ever taught you."

Cory folded her arms. Now understanding. Her mother confused her. She nodded toward the bar. "Why'd you give the urn to Sally and Rose?"

Estelle smiled at Sally. "Sentimental reasons. Sally asked to have it. I thought it was wonderful that it might serve more of the same people after all this time. People fail, but the coffee keeps coming."

Cory smiled despite herself. Estelle grinned at Sally. Then Mr. Bishop turned and nodded. "Not as many as before. Taste goes acid if it sits too long."

"Not as many come through here as before," Sally said.

Cory blinked, remembering childhood days wrapped in her own fantasies, moving through a changing catalogue of visitors, all drinking coffee, all talking quietly, all leaving after a week or two, never to return. She had pretended they were all an ever-new, ever-fresh selection of characters from the stories she read and enacted while she played. The farm had been busy then. Just as abruptly it had stopped being so busy. Fewer strangers, till finally it was just the family. The family and their franchised allotment of robots.

She looked sharply at Sally, then Mr. Bishop, finally her mother.

Estelle was quiet a long while, then nodded.

"You never knew, really. You were only four, maybe five when we stopped smuggling labor draft refugees through on the way to Canada. We got caught. Scared us all, we thought we'd lose everything. We swore off it, signed a loyalty statement, made concessions. They didn't really have enough evidence, though, but we didn't know that. They didn't want

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to risk a trial—we didn't know *that*. So an arrangement was made and for years we could only sit by and watch and not help. I guess it's not at all surprising what you've done, considering who raised you."

She fished in her pocket for a handkerchief and swiped it across her nose. "But they never forget. They waited and when we lost so many robots all at once they had their chance to shut us down in a proper legal manner that caused no alarm, prompted no headlines, no newscasts, nothing. Just a stroke. I honestly believe they would still have made a deal for the names of the others we worked with, but bad health stole their chance. They ruined us—killed your father, for all practical purposes."

Cory looked over at Sally and Mr. Bishop, who watched now, gauging her reaction as she regarded them with new appreciation. "I suppose," she said carefully, "that those people were never caught."

"Not a one," Mr. Bishop said.

Sally chuckled and stood. "It's almost lunchtime. The NRAA people always eat here."

"So," Estelle said. "What are you going to do now?"

"Why'd you come down from Lincoln, Mom?"

Estelle shrugged. "It's a thing families do from time to time. You know, when things get difficult."

Cory smiled. "I already asked Agent Cadeford to look into the possibility of me reacquiring the farm. I think I'd like to go ahead with that."

"That'll take time. Might not happen at all under the circumstances. What about right now?"

She held a hand out across the table. "I think I'd like to talk. A lot."●

We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writer's name and mailing address, even if you use e-mail. Letters can be e-mailed to 71154.662@compuserve.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, *Asimov's*, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication. The e-mail address is for editorial correspondence *only*—questions about subscriptions should be directed to Box 5130, Harlan, IA 51593-5130.

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MANY MOONS AGO

At first I liked the Lunar Base.
It was exciting. New. I liked
the thought of living out in space.
But there was nothing to be psyched

about. The moon was dull. It had
no life, besides the Base. Each day,
each week, were all the same. Then Dad
got transferred once again. *Hooray!*

I cried, *we're going someplace new.*
But it was just another Base,
on another moon. Nothing to
do or see, just like the old place.

I miss the planet of my birth,
its summer heat and winter snow.
There was a time we lived on Earth,
but that was many moons ago.

—Lawrence Schimel

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We received this story from Lou Tabakow just before he died, and as far as we know, it will be the last of his original tales to see print. "Blood and Judgment" is set in the same China as his earlier *Asimov's* stories—"Good with Rice"

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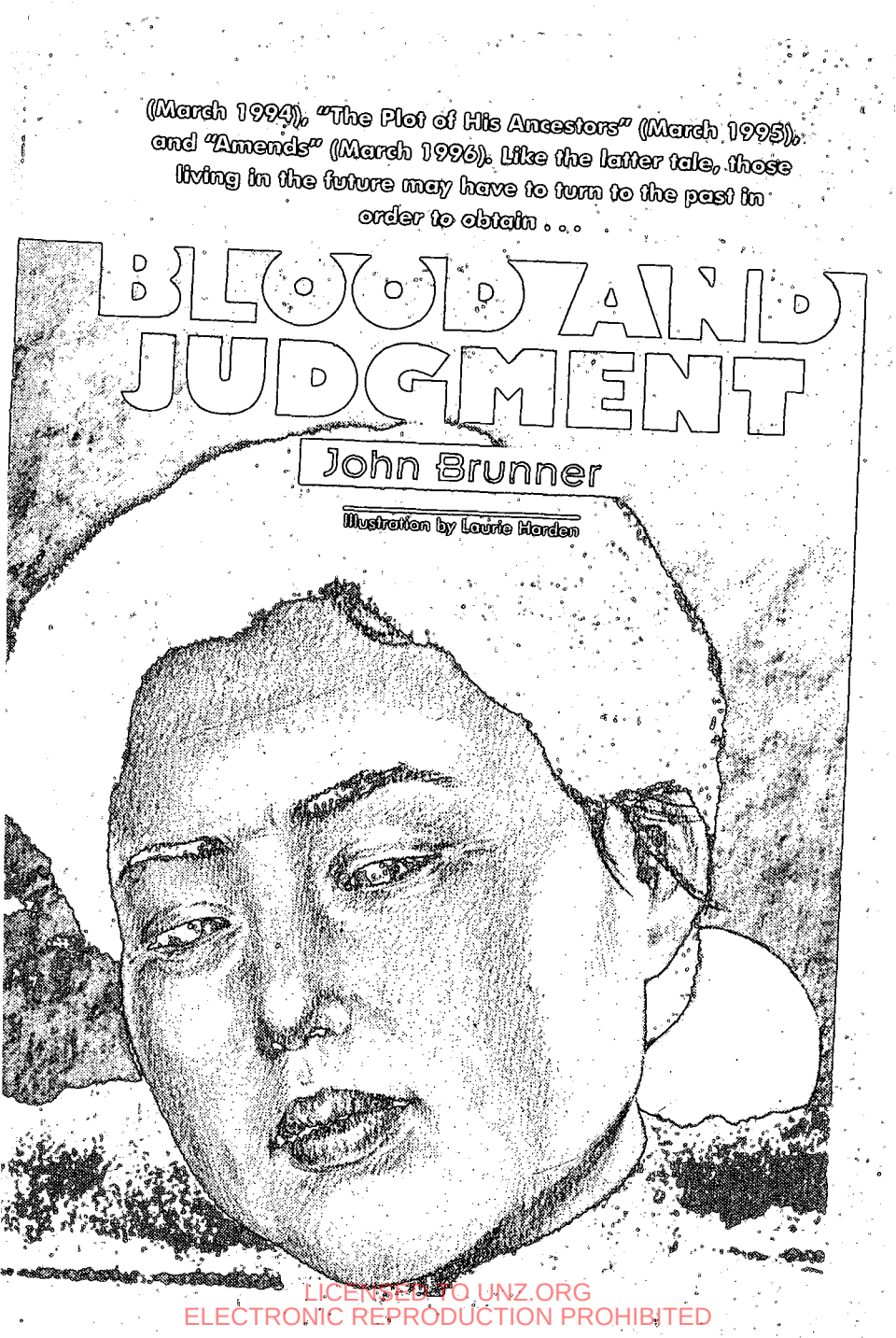
(March 1994), "The Plot of His Ancestors" (March 1995), and "Amends" (March 1996). Like the latter tale, those living in the future may have to turn to the past in order to obtain . . .

BLOOD AND JUDGMENT

John Brunner

Illustration by Laurie Harden



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Who's planting next year's rice?

Beyond the nonexistent frontier of the Sang Xiang Special Economic Zone—for which read unofficial, because it was real enough for those trying to flee the spread of epidemics, or dreaming through ignorance of a better life in the sickness-riddled cities than could be found on farms—things immediately proved even worse than Hui Qing had feared. Those struggling to leave as the governor ordered must have met those attempting to enter. The result was a new settlement, a shantytown sprawling either side of the formerly much-vaunted highway, around which city police marched back and forth with leveled guns.

In the rear passenger seat of the convoy's lead jeep Qing shuddered at the stench. Some of it came from fires of rubbish whereon people lucky enough to control a few permanent square meters cooked what the others could find to eat. Rats were commonest, though some patient souls contrived to catch carp and barbel in the river that ran past, less polluted since so many factories upstream went bankrupt.

But most of the stink, of course, came from sewage.

Above what had previously been a distributorship for tractors and agricultural vehicles a sign tilted at a crazy angle said ISUZU in three scripts, Chinese, Japanese, and Roman.

Who's planting next year's rice?

For the first part of the run the road was passable. Police kept all four lanes clear of the countless frustrated wretches forbidden to go on and unwilling to return, who seemed rather to be wandering at random than searching for anywhere that might offer a chance to stay and settle. It was impossible to do anything about the verges, though; squatters had built those over with huts of mud and scrap, surrounded by pitiful plots of vegetables. And, of course, everywhere there were graves. More people had died in the past five years than at any time since the famine of the Great Leap Forward.

Whose survivors had had such hopes of the new economic policies, yet were so ignorant of the state the world had been reduced to . . .

In English they used a Norman word: parlous. That would do.

The convoy halted briefly at a police post so its commander, Lieutenant Gao, could confirm the latest news of what lay in their path. Aroused, one of the destitute roadside dwellers forced himself to his feet, on which he wore what had once been expensive imported shoes but now were masked in mud. Drawing the jacket of a tattered business suit around his torso, tightening a ragged tie around the collar of a shirt much too large for his shrunken, almost wizened throat, he approached the stopped vehicles brandishing a late-model camcorder. Whether he was offering it for sale or hoping someone might hire him to use it, was unclear. Either course seemed pointless. There were few batteries nowadays, and they cost the earth.

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And it had been long since in this area a day went by without power-cuts.

Who's planting next year's rice?

The convoy resumed speed. Within an hour it reached the narrows of the Kong Gong river, narrower than ever thanks to the government's lunatic insistence on damming it for hydroelectric power. (Qing remembered the minister who had forced the decision through. He had been ousted. Even his name had been expunged. It "did not do" to let memory of a failed official be associated with The Party.) In the rubble that was all that remained of the project, one of the riverboats, formerly the main means of transport through the valley, had been beached more or less on an even keel and at once turned into a refuge for a few, a pitiable few, of those who had farmed on land the broken dam had washed away. The rock that had underlain the sparse soil now lay bare to the uncaring sky. Here and there along the water's edge, ranks of sickly men and women clad alike in pants of synthetic fiber, which didn't rot, strove to heap up mounds of earth sufficient to plant a few greens.

But it would not last. It would not be enough.

In the very throat of the gorge the heavy four-square buildings intended to house the dynamos lurched drunkenly down the hillsides, too obviously dangerous for even the desperate to seek refuge inside. By this point there were no longer any individual graves, only mass pits.

Beyond the ruined power station lay plots of land sold to foreign investors where they should have built factories to exploit the electricity. Even the barbed wire delineating the boundaries had been stolen. Signboards of wood and plastic had also been taken away. The sole remaining notice was cast in concrete too heavy to move. However, the bronze letters of its owners' name had been prized loose. Only traces left by the corrosion that had begun at once in the moist air remained to show they had spelled out DAEWOO. How China had changed in the past ten years!

As the barren plots of land faded behind, the highway shrank to two lanes, much pitted by heavy trucks running on steel-reinforced tires, and occasionally tanks. Here and there crude shacks bore the last trace of Special Economic Zone enterprise. To be precise, from the corners of their roofs, from their chimney if they had one (but those were rare), or from a post driven into soft ground nearby, there hung faded quarantine flags: yellow, with bright red characters inscribed on each. Most said TB; a few, typhoid, diphtheria, or cholera. One warned of polio. Qing started. She had imagined the disease extinct. Well, maybe it was a wrong diagnosis.

Who's planting next year's rice?

Beneath the ragged grey clouds that smeared the sky the ridges flanking the gorge disappeared into the distance. Either side of the highway the land regained a semblance of normality. There were paddies with well-maintained ditches and plump ducks quacking at the convoy. They

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even glimpsed, through doorway curtains, living rooms with television sets and computers waiting for the nightly restoration of a power supply. Most impressive of all, there were healthy children making their way to school. But the price was plain. Along the road, barefoot and in rags, cashless refugees gazed woefully about them. At each of the neat presentable villages there were guards with guns staring down these strangers, making it clear what would happen to anyone who tried to stop and beg for food.

She had heard of this undeclared civil war. Even she, though, even in her former rank, had not imagined it loomed so close to Feng Gong and the coast.

And given the number of memorials to the dead, improvised from oil-drums and barrels that had held agricultural chemicals, only the need to save the last fertile land for crops dictated where they buried their corpses. Had it been the government's belated realization that bodies must be recycled that had created this chaos?

Or was it merely hunger? Or was it. . . ?

Qing didn't want to believe the last possibility that mocked at her, like one of the devils her childhood friends had mumbled about; she had been sent to a Christian school, though not converted. She didn't want to believe that even the ideals she had grown up on, that she had shared with her one permitted child whom her ex-husband hated so for being a girl, would prove incapable of governing the only country with more than a billion people. But . . .

"Who's planting next year's rice?"

From the adjacent seat Lieutenant Gao cast her a puzzled sidelong glance. It had been clear from the start that he was unsure how to deal with his unexpected companion. Himself no more than twenty-three or -four, he was overwhelmed at finding himself nominally in command of someone he had known of since boyhood as one of China's most distinguished biologists.

Nowadays in disgrace.

"Is something wrong, lieutenant?" Qing sighed, foreseeing a difficult journey.

The young man swallowed hard.

"Nothing. Though I was just wondering . . ."

"Out with it!"

"Is that a quotation?"

Taken aback, she found herself blinking at him. After a moment she snapped, "Is what a quotation?"

"The question you just—uh—uttered!"

She realized belatedly that the phrase so often echoing within her head had escaped her lips. Forcing a dry smile, she remembered who had actually spoken it, and indeed not very far away, back at the main railway

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station in Feng Gong. He had been an American, one of an international financial team hoping to coin yet more fortunes from the untapped ore of China. She had been an advisor doubling as an interpreter, her English being already pretty good.

At the time the new economic policies were in full flow; the new stock exchanges were creating paper fortunes and foreign companies were gathering like carrion crows. But as he watched immigrants from the countryside flooding out of the arriving trains the American had paled under his tawny skin and muttered, "But who's planting next year's rice?"

The company he worked for did not after all invest in the magnificent new market. It likewise failed to take a bath in the grand crash ten years later, when the government found it had to spend all the money so far earned by "selling our grandparents' jade" to buy rice from abroad at inflated prices and fend off yet another famine.

This time there was no jade left to sell.

As for herself . . .

Qing bit back the thousand bitter words she could have hurled forth about her downfall. What was the point? Doubtless conditioned by long exposure to the government's policy—who more likely than an aspiring young officer?—he could only be deferring to her out of respect for her greater age. Who any longer knew about the scandals at cabinet level that had swung one way rather than another about the time this youth was in the cradle, save those who had good reason, having been involved?

The lieutenant was still staring at her with an expectant face as the jeep bumped and blundered its way along what was degenerating from even a two-lane road into something more like the sort of country lane she recalled from childhood. (Funny! Today everything seemed to be bearing her back into the past.) She parried in a rusty voice, "From whom could it be a quotation, do you think?" The possibility had not previously crossed her mind.

"Well . . ." He licked his lips. "I thought maybe Fu Yi?"

It was as though an icicle had pierced her spine.

From lifelong habit, however, she controlled her burgeoning excitement. Maintaining a neutral tone, she repeated, "Fu Yi?"

"Well, this used to be known as Nong Quan, didn't it?" He made a vague gesture to the landscape ahead. In the declining sunshine lay the next in a sequence of valleys cut by the river—the one singled out by the poet and artist who a century ago had added his name to the roster of China's most distinguished creators, painting of his chosen home exquisite watercolors and appending to each a poem like a tiny, perfectly faceted gemstone.

The pressure building in Qing's mind overcame her prudence.

"How the hell did you hear about Nong Quan?"

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For things that celebrated the past had been anathema in the Cultural Revolution, at which time Gao's parents would have been of an age to have their education interrupted.

As her own had been.

"From my grandparents," the boy muttered in seeming embarrassment. "And you?" he added with abrupt defiance.

"From my parents," Qing admitted after a dry-mouthed pause.

"Ah-hah!" He tensed, twisting his body around in the cramped seat. "Are we going to pass—?"

She canceled his intended words with a shrug. "The names remain. The land has changed."

His whole face brightened. "Now that definitely was—"

"No, it wasn't."

"But—"

"You weren't hearing what I said. You heard what you expected me to say. Fu Yi captioned that painting you're thinking of: 'The names change. The land remains.'"

"Of course! But—" His face fell. "Oh. I see what you mean."

"Thanks be for that. I'm an opinionated old so-and-so, you know." She forced her expression into the nearest to a scowl that her features could contrive. Despite her age and much suffering, they remained benignly good-humored. "Weren't you warned to beware of me, a suspected enemy of the people?"

He gave a nervous laugh.

"Don't worry!" She clapped him companionably on the shoulder. "I get on well with anyone who knows the work of Fu Yi. Look, over there on the right. Before they sold the old farms for building there were vines on those slopes. Fu Yi said—"

Bursting out, Gao cried, "'Source of sweetness without honey, not requiring bees'?"

"Well, well!" She bent her frosty brows on him. "You have learned your lesson! Now during the next leg of this trip . . ."

She could feel the relaxation flowing along the meridians, starting at her solar plexus and working its way upward through her lungs, downward into those organs whose functions, whose very presence, she had come close to forgetting. At the edge of her mind a hint of a possibility loomed.

But one must not meddle. One must never do that. She had fulfilled her obligation, knowing even then that it would have been better to have gone without. Which she would willingly have done if her then husband hadn't been so rooted in the past. . . . No, best to let their daughter find her own way in the world.

Nonetheless she couldn't stop herself from wondering: how about this handsome young officer? Was he the sort of person who would insist not

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only on a child, but a male child, and yet not be content with that when the boy proved uninterested in spending the necessary time to track down one of those increasingly rare partners, a virgin bride—uninterested in fact in continuing his father's line?

She checked. She was falling again into a trap she had encountered before. She had been deluded into imagining that this person beside her, who knew nearly as much of Fu Yi's poetry as she did, and hung on every word of the descriptions she could offer of the paintings they belonged with (for she had seen rare and precious reproductions, he had not), was of her own generation. In fact she was of an age to be his grandmother. Just. But it had been traditional in what everyone now thought of as Old China for boys and girls to partner young. Even someone like Gao, who knew about Fu Yi, was apt to have imbibed the same kind of unspoken assumption.

All of which led to—unspeakable—possibilities.

Much potentially embarrassing time remained before nightfall and the first overnight stop. Perhaps she might occupy some of it by sounding out Gao in advance.

As the valley that had been called in the old days Nong Quan retreated behind them, no longer gracious and lovely with vines and peaches and handsome hand-carved verandahs whereon gentry took their summer ease and turns in improvising verse of which much had proved durable, Qing changed the subject.

"What do you know of what I've been assigned to do on this journey?"

The lieutenant hesitated. Suddenly, with alarming boldness, he said, "To be frank, my chief said I was to keep you out of the way as much as possible."

She nodded thoughtfully. That fitted. The new group—the standard term for those who had shuffled to the top in the latest Beijing upheaval—was collectively pledged to restoring the national economy and repaying the debts due to foreign firms, because owing so much to America, Europe, Japan, and now of course Australia as well made those aware of the situation think of the unhappy, dishonorable years after World War I when even though China had fought on the Allied side, defeated Germany was granted "concessions" on her territory.

That, though, was the public face—all the public was permitted to see. Only people like Qing who had been allowed behind the scenes, albeit for a short time, could guess, deduce, speculate about the true eventual cost . . . and who would be compelled to pay for it. For example, if they genuinely wanted to reduce the country's external debt, her husband and his cronies would scarcely be ordering million-dollar technical equipment for which neither the training nor the personnel could be found.

But the days when such matters concerned Hui Qing lay behind her, as far behind as the city of Feng Gong. Permanently? It would not sur-

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prise her. The weapon of internal exile was an even older Chinese punishment than Russian.

All things considered, as Fu Yi had once said, "Safer and saner to reflect on harvest than politics. A hard-working man may grow food and sleep sound with a comfortable belly, aware that he has provided for his family."

Yet it saddened her to think what deception her ex-husband was using to maintain his own position.

Inevitably the jeep was slowed by the two accompanying heavy trucks, each with four men on board and half a ton of equipment: the first bringing new equipment for a country hospital—that was Qing's official reason for coming along—and the second up-to-date replacement gear for a communications outstation. However, there was so little other traffic on the road that by sundown they were five hundred kilometers from the coast. Half an hour ahead of schedule, they halted for the night at a military camp. After a scratch army meal of massive noodles and watery sauce, eaten under the intense scrutiny of the young conscripts whose training was the main duty of the station, Gao allowed the others to go look at television for a while, for they could sleep on the road tomorrow, but himself retired early to bed. Qing thought about watching at least the news, but managed to resist the temptation and copied his example. She had been assigned to a private room where she would have gone to sleep at once had not her neighbors returned just as she was dropping off, and launched into a fierce argument about some matter of discipline. Clearly the row was going to continue for a fair while.

At length, in great annoyance, she rolled over and switched on the light. Sitting up, staring around in hope of finding something to read, her eye fell on a picture—more exactly, a print—stuck to the door, that she had failed to notice as she came to bed. In the lower right corner was a caption in electric blue: "Some must die that others may eat."

Though poorly reproduced, the little picture was surprisingly vivid. It showed a child barely more than a toddler, wide-eyed, open-mouthed, clinging to a leash which clearly must be threaded through the nostrils of a piglet that had just been slaughtered . . . but one could not see the dead beast, or indeed any sign of it, except that afternoon sunlight reflected on to the child and bathed him, face, hands, clothes, in the red of blood. That was brilliant!

Scrambling out of bed, she padded barefoot to inspect it more closely. As she had expected, the elegant calligraphy of its caption was contrasted by the discreet, deliberately casual two-character signature of—who else?—Fu Yi.

She stared in astonishment. She had imagined herself better acquainted than most with the work of the underrated master, but she had never

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realized he tackled domestic subjects like this. Had it been known, surely he would have joined the list of those accepted as objects of emulation for the youth of modern China, for even those who had portrayed, for example, the misery of a cast-out serving-girl had been recruited to the proletarian heritage.

Of course, in the particular case she had in mind she had always suspected the artist was mainly interested in snatching the chance to paint a pretty young woman virtually deprived of her clothes . . .

But it was fascinating to know that despite official disapproval Fu Yi was still remembered, still admired in his former homeland.

She was still puzzling over that when she realized belatedly there was silence at last from next door. Hastily she rubbed her eyes, sore from the long dusty road, and shut them with a firm order to go to sleep.

It worked.

The convoy's schedule called for them to be on the road at 0600, as they had been yesterday—there was a campaign to make the most of daylight—but at this base of course they kept even earlier hours, and when Qing took her place, yawning and stretching, in the canteen breakfast line, she was not especially surprised to be summoned to join the camp commandant, along with Gao.

The commandant proved to be a glowering, suspicious fellow with bad teeth. For a while he contented himself with inquiries about the state of affairs in Feng Gong and the effect of the interruption in river-traffic on the Sang Xiang economic zone. At length, however, it dawned on Qing—and Gao only moments later—that what he, like everyone else in China, was really after was a suggestion as to how he might retire rich.

Qing came from the sort of family who had turned down opportunities to feather their nest in hope of securing a better future for the nation as a whole. She despised greedy and dishonest people. The commandant struck her as both of those.

So, as a matter of fact, did her former husband, which was the chief reason why she didn't mind their separation.

One thing communism had done within her lifetime, she told herself wryly, was to make men pay attention to women's opinions. Gao was an example of its effect. Before uttering the obvious question—how about exploiting Fu Yi?—he looked at her.

Affording her the chance to change the subject, so effectively that when they rose to take their leave the commandant's expression made it clear that he was aware of having been misdirected, yet uncertain how, or indeed how anything of the sort could have happened. Reduced to that state, he was immediately eager to dismiss these unpleasant strangers who clearly had nothing to offer him. Grumpily he waved them away and turned his attention to an aide delivering overnight messages.

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Gao confined his reaction to curious sidelong glances until, aboard their jeep, they were rolling along one of the few well-repaired stretches they were to meet during the day. The presence of the army camp accounted for that; there were teams of conscripts assembling by the gate to collect picks, shovels, and rammers.

Then the young lieutenant ventured, "In the room assigned to us last night, I found a painting by Fu Yi that I didn't know. Not an actual painting. A reproduction."

And waited.

Eventually Qing inclined her head.

"Yes, there was one in my room, too."

"You—uh—didn't draw attention to . . ."

"To the commercial potential? Why should I? Besides, it's probable that someone else has spotted that."

"Not—uh . . . ?" He swallowed painfully, his Adam's apple bobbing wildly on his thin throat.

"Not genuine? Could be. Could very well be. I'm no expert. But at all events I'd rather someone who cares about art got his hands on any profit."

"How do you think . . . ?" Again, his voice failed him.

"How do I think some of his work can be known locally and even reproduced when the rest of the world hasn't heard about it? Oh, it wouldn't be the first time such a thing has happened. But equally likely is that someone is copying the style of the famous artist and hoping to delude foreign buyers. Or rather, was. It's the sort of thing people started out doing in the New Economic Policy period, but that didn't last. As you doubtless know."

"The New Economic Policy didn't last? But it's scarcely under way!"

"Oh, sorry." She gave a grim chuckle. "I wasn't thinking about this one. I was thinking about an earlier version. Of course, people don't get told about that. It's too like the present one. Even my daughter wouldn't know about it if I hadn't made a point of telling her."

His eyes were bulbing by now. "Did it go wrong?" he achieved after vast effort.

"Oh, it nearly got us taken over by the Japanese. . . ." She was glancing from one side to the other. "You know, I seem to recognize this area. I remember being told a long time ago that Fu Yi blended all the places he traveled to, and there were a lot of them, into Nong Quan, so that sometimes people went there looking for a particular spot and couldn't find it." Checking at his sudden tension, she added, "You know the story?"

"The one about the rich collector from Shanghai?"

"Carry on." She braced herself against the roof support as the jeep reached the end of the stretch repaired by the army and began to lurch from side to side.

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"I haven't thought of this for years," Gao muttered, doing the same. "Well, there were supposed to be a set of four pictures that had been sent for sale separately. This man from Shanghai decided to collect them all. He had a windfall and was able to do so. Not only that, he was able to come down here to search out the original location. Only he couldn't find it. Furious, he tracked down Fu Yi and upbraided him." He hesitated.

"Go on."

"But the artist merely told him to go home another way and this time keep his eyes peeled. . . ." His face brightened. "You know, I never thought about it that way before. I thought he was just getting rid of a nuisance."

Cynically, she curled her upper lip.

He was silent after that for a long time. The first signs of rain blurred the country ahead. At length he ventured, "Was it something like that? What happened to you?"

"Was what like that?"

"Your—uh—removal."

"You mean my divorce?" She couldn't resist a harsh chuckle at the response the word provoked; clearly Gao was a properly prudish fellow, a credit to the state and its principles. In China mention of divorce prompted all sorts of indecent implications, above all the idea of going to bed with more than one partner. But he forced himself to a swift recovery and gave a vigorous nod.

"That's something else I never really thought of before. I mean, I never met anyone who had been divorced. . . . Had you?"

"My parents. But that was forced on them. For political reasons."

"Our government can be cruel, can't it?" The words were barely breathed.

"Yes. Very cruel. On the other hand, without it we could still be stuck in the mud of the past."

"We can still be afraid to praise an artist like Fu Yi for choosing a proletarian subject because it was outweighed by his other work, the work he did for the rich who hired him."

"That's true." She shot a surprised sidelong glance at her companion. It had clearly been too long since she kept in touch with the opinions of the younger generation.

Either that, or . . .

But she couldn't bring herself to believe that Gao had been specially selected and trained to force her into self-betrayal. Of course, no doubt those who had been so trapped (and she had witnessed the technique in use) had felt the same before the noose drew tight. . . .

At random, to distract herself, she said, "So what kind of a family was yours, then?"

"Ordinary." He gave a shrug. "My father was head of a factory produc-

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tion brigade. He built railway locomotives until they changed from steam to diesel. Then he went over to rolling stock. Now he specializes in high-class sleeping cars. That was how he met my mother. She works in the factory health department."

"As a nurse?"

"No, she's a hygienist. She has risen to oversee the health and hygiene section."

"I see." Qing let her eyes range over the country ahead. There was more rain looming. It was the wrong season, but everyone knew, thanks to satellite television, that the world's climate had been changed and the seasons were no longer to be trusted. "And was it your father's or your mother's parents who told you about Fu Yi?"

There was a longer pause than usual. Eventually he said, "My mother's."

"Your father's—?"

"My father's parents," he interrupted firmly, "disappeared. It was a long time ago."

"I see."

She did. All too clearly. So many people disappeared in those sad times. Her own family had lost many relatives. Clearing her throat, she said, "Did your grandparents have any idea about who might have secreted work by Fu Yi?"

Relieved, he brightened. "I'm afraid not. But of course almost anyone with respect for genuine creativity and talent might have decided to override the authorities."

She could have taunted, "So you think it is good to defy the government?" But the same charge had been leveled against her, personified to involve her husband, too often for her to find it amusing. She said merely, "If I remember rightly he ended his life not far from here. Do you imagine we may find someone who knows the answer at our next stop?"

"Well, someone has been copying and circulating his pictures. Presumably someone who knew where the unpublished ones were kept."

"Yes, my very thought. Lieutenant Gao, we can look forward to an interesting stay at—what do they call this village that we're heading for?"

"You mean Mo Quan?"

"That's the name."

"Well, I suppose it is a village. That is, assuming a village can have a population of fifty thousand. But I have the impression Mo Quan is no ordinary village."

Indeed, it was plain from a distance Mo Quan was a different settlement from the regular run, though as had happened throughout the country the shortage of gasoline meant that the traffic had reverted to the sort of mix one had been used to in the old days, with few cars or

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trucks and many bicycles and pedal-driven carts or wheelbarrows. It stood on a small hill with a stream running down one side, presumably siphoned under an impervious stratum from a range of hills visible beyond. Qing heard Gao mutter as they approached, "'Where water flows the sky did not let fall.'"

She caught his attention and gave a smile and nod. The same quotation had sprung to her own mind. There was no doubt Fu Yi had been a keen observer.

They were expected. The truck with the military communications gear—which would in due course supplement local domestic phone services, too—was directed to the top of the hill, where there was already a small radio base, while the one with the medical equipment was dispatched to the hospital, a group of huts clustered around a brick building near the river.

The usual bureaucratic paperwork having been sorted out, the troops were billeted in nearby homes while Gao and Qing were escorted to spare rooms in a mansion near the hospital, built in the ancient style around an internal courtyard, which now formed both the town hall and the mayor's residence. Having had time to wash and tidy up, they were invited to meet the mayor, Li Qian, and his wife, who was also a Li—Li Dou. Qing took to the mayor on sight: a thin fiftyish man with a worried, square face lined as from much experience in earlier life, who reminded her of her father at the same age.

He and his family—they had the one prescribed child, a daughter in her early teens, whom Qing was glad to see they treated with unalloyed affection—entertained their visitors to a well-cooked dinner and kept the conversation to a casual level until the girl was sent to bed. During the meal, though, Li kept shooting glances at Qing as though expecting her to explode like a time-bomb. Even Gao, clearly ill at ease in these comfortable surroundings, noticed and wondered why.

Well, of course, Qing reasoned, it must be difficult for a local administrator like this to know what to do with the divorced wife of a government minister. However, the room was plainly decorated and lacked any sign of Fu Yi's work, or indeed any pictures, which might have prompted a more constructive mood; she was bursting to find out more about this unknown store of beauty.

Once the child had gone, some hints emerged of the reason why the situation here was worrying their hosts so much. Barely a hundred kilometers away, they learned, the country was falling under the sway of an old-style warlord, and peasants carrying produce to market complained of being "taxed" on the way by groups of armed men.

This was not conducive to a restful life.

Thinking to soothe matters, she suggested that they might watch the television news, it being nearly due. Li exchanged glances with his wife.

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There was a wealth of implication in their faces. Qing felt her nape crawl. Something was wrong. Something affecting herself?

"You are sure it would not be too much to bear?" Li Dou murmured sympathetically.

Bewildered, Qing blurted, "But what do you mean?"

"You've not yet heard?" Li countered. His wife closed her fingers on his. Staring, Gao demanded to know what could be amiss.

Disregarding the words, Li pushed back his chair and strode to the set. He muttered something to his wife, who with instant solicitude prepared a soft chair for Qing. Dimly aware of impending catastrophe, Gao hovered at her side as the screen lighted.

It was the third or fourth item. The instant its import became clear she felt her fingers clench into her palms. Without breath, without sound, she was aware of saying, "So that's why the bastard wanted me out of the way!"

Their daughter Jiang, whom she had not seen in three years nor heard from in nearly two, was under arrest on the island resort of Hainan, charged with the robbery and murder of a rich Filipino allegedly her lover. Someone had taken a home movie of them swimming together near the hotel where she was working. She was bare-breasted as though on the Mediterranean, the way only the children of the rich and influential dared to go in public. That was calculated to arouse disapproval, of course; had there not been a political motive such pictures would never have been broadcast.

The rest of the pictures were less happy. The Filipino's body lay in a culvert beneath a road-bridge; it had been concealed with dirt and rubbish. Stretcher-bearers were shown emerging with it. He had been strangled with a silk scarf; the marks were clear around his throat. Though there was no sign of his watch, his gold ring and a gold crucifix had supposedly been found in Jiang's room; well, any jury might have doubts about something so obvious, but more damning was the claim that her blood had been found and typed on the fatal scarf. Supposedly she had caught a nail in the fabric and torn it back to the quick. Dazed, as though in shock, she let a policeman hold up her injured hand for the camera.

Plus, of course, a boastful demonstration of the machine that had identified her blood.

Qing's vision blurred. In dismay she realized her eyes were full of tears. What she was seeing, though, was far less vivid than the memories that of a sudden had fallen together.

"I suspect," said a quiet voice beside her, "there is more to this than we shall learn from television."

Who was that—Li? Strangely enough, no. It was young Gao, who surely could not be that knowledgeable about the ways of the world . . . could he?

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But he was right, and abruptly she was coldly furious. The plot against her was suddenly so clear, and so insulting, she wanted more than anything to fight back.

And apart from her daughter it didn't matter who got hurt. There was, after all, one man dead already.

Did she really take a rich foreigner as a lover? Could she have?

At a whisper from her husband Dou offered a tiny glass of *mao tai.* Qing sipped it gratefully. It exploded in her guts like lava. Li said as detachedly as though he were acting as an investigating magistrate, "In law one must always hear the case for the defense as well as the prosecution. One imagines there are facts not included in that report. May we know them?"

The sound on the television had been switched off, but the screen still moved with meaningless figures: human beings, animals, machines. Keeping her eyes on them while reciting the fatal truth, she listened to her own voice as though a stranger were speaking.

"Twenty years ago I was young, quite pretty, and the best student in my university class. Clearly I was marked out for a successful future. The person you know as Chan Jin-yao had recently been appointed to the department, not on the medical but on the personnel side. He was my political officer.

"He made much of me, praising my attitude and devotion to work, and eventually when he was twenty-seven and I was twenty-four he suggested we should marry. I was somewhat reluctant, for during the Cultural Revolution my parents had been forced to split up and sent to different areas for 're-education.' By the same token, though, it seemed that life would be a lot more secure were I tied to a Party member so well established at such an early age. Above all it would mean I could remain in Long Jing so that if my parents found their way back they could at least trace my whereabouts. My family had lived in Long Jing since time immemorial.

"Soon after we married I became pregnant. That was when I began to find out what sort of a man I had for a husband. At three months he sent me for a hormone test. It showed my baby would be a girl. Jin-yao was furious. It was as though I had betrayed him. He had so high a regard for himself, he felt insulted by having a daughter for his only child. Of course, he demanded that I get an abortion. I was educated; I was qualified to run a complete laboratory to a high standard. To him, though, I was like a mere servant. But I was damned if I'd give up my baby. I warned him that if he persisted I would tell his superiors and see what they felt about his behavior. It was at about that time the public began to grasp that with everyone opting for boys there were going to be a hell of a lot more homosexuals and a hell of a lot fewer descendants to visit their graves on the day for remembering ancestors.

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"For the next several years he seemed to have got over it. Jiang—our daughter—was sent to a good Party school, mixed with diplomats' children, led the sort of life only the privileged can expect. Meantime my husband worked his way up the ladder and three years ago, when Jiang was eighteen, he trumped up an excuse to have my department investigated. Some shortage of funds was 'discovered' and I was blamed. He used that as an excuse for divorcing me. He'd wanted to get rid of me for a long time, as I was well aware. I even suspect his hand behind my assignation to this post, so far from Long Jing.

"No one else realized, of course. To everyone outside he was charm personified.

"Well, I didn't mind too much. We'd scarcely seen each other for years. He spent half his time in Beijing—scheming, though I didn't know it, to obtain a post in the Central Party. Now, as you know, he's in the Cabinet.

"Unfortunately Jiang . . . well, she'd decided to study catering and hotel management, which I thought a sensible choice and her father didn't raise any objection to. However, she does remain, you must remember, the obstacle to him fulfilling his ambition for a son. Not even at his level is it possible for a Party officer to have a second child. You have to be very senior indeed to stand a chance, and the risk of it being used to force you from office if it becomes known . . ." She shrugged and spread her hands.

"Do you think," she resumed after a pause, "that she really killed and robbed this rich Filipino? "

There was an uncomfortable pause. Eventually Li said, not looking at her, "The radio news, earlier on, said something about drugs and other western immorality."

"And I didn't believe it," his wife said firmly. After a brief hesitation she went on, "What struck me as odd was the emphasis on the blood-stained scarf."

"That," Qing sighed, "is only to be expected."

"Why so?"—from Gao.

"One of the little facts I've accumulated over the years to trip him up if he ever really annoyed me . . ." *And now he's done it,* she reflected.

They were staring at her. She seized the rest of the *mao tai* and drained it. It was so fierce, she felt giddy as she returned the glass to the table. Rendered reckless, she blurted, "Oh, everybody ought to be told about the bastard! Of course he wants to prove this blood-typing system works! It's from Switzerland and they plan to sell fifty machines in China. Each of them costs two million and for every one installed in this country Jin-yao stands to be paid thirty thousand! But"—she clenched her fists until the knuckles whitened—"I never imagined he would sacrifice our daughter!"

Suddenly it seemed funny.

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"Of course it makes a crazy kind of sense," she finished with a bitter laugh. "With Jiang out of the way at last, and me off the scene already, he'll have the chance to father his long-awaited male descendant. Oh, I so hope he doesn't manage to assassinate me as well! If he does get that son he yearns for, I want to live to tell him what kind of a man his father is!"

She had never heard such venom in her voice. The pause that followed was full of embarrassment. Suddenly she realized how strange it was to sit in a house, surrounded by a busy town, and hear near-silence. Since the creation of the Sang Xiang special economic zone her home city Feng Gong had operated twenty-four hours a day with all the concomitant noise. She tried not to notice the contrast.

At last, however, Gao said with a frown, "Why are you helping him?"

"What?"

He looked her straight in the eye.

"The packs of medical equipment we delivered for you. Sure, there are donor and transfusion kits, there are cold-storage units, there's a plasma centrifuge, everything I would have expected to refit the hematology department at a small country hospital. But there are also boxes of sterile sample tubes and a computer program designed to classify the contents."

"You said—" Qing began.

"No I didn't." Gao's mouth quirked in amusement. "It's just as you said when I mistook that remark for a quotation from Fu Yi. You heard what you expected to hear."

"Fu Yi?" Dou said alertly. Her husband, though he also had reacted on hearing the name, bid her shush.

Hunching forward, Gao said, "You asked what I'd been told about your job here. I gave you a perfectly literal answer. But I also told you—didn't I?—that my mother is head of health and hygiene in a big factory. She receives all the latest news about developments in medicine and biology, and whenever I go home she passes on the leaflets and the magazines. I got a commendation once because I knew something I'd found out that way." He looked modest. "Of course, I was only a cadet at the time."

"So?" Qing's voice was as drab as before.

"So I think your former husband is anxious to promote these blood-typing machines for use by police forensic departments. Once they get a toehold, every town and city will demand one. In a country of over a billion he'll be selling hundreds instead of a mere fifty, maybe thousands. Unfortunately we're short of foreign currency—as usual. How could he spend so much money on promoting an import he has a personal stake in? I'll hazard a guess. The excuse he is using to promote these machines is to say we are contributing to the human genome project. It's a decade behindhand and the western countries are anxious to spread what's turned out to be an unexpectedly heavy load, so he's very likely getting them at a subsidized discount."

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Mayor Li tensed. "But that's exactly what we've been told we have to do to justify this new gear you've brought in! I've argued over and over that it's pointless to send it here. It ought to go to Wuhan or Changsha."

"You mean you can't spare the time to analyze genome samples," Qing said thoughtfully.

"We haven't got the personnel! Besides, though we do have a hospital, for any major operation we have to fly the patients out. And that's becoming expensive, you know. On top of which, they haven't sent us anyone properly trained in the use of all this modern stuff."

"Yes, I can imagine." Through the roar of blood in her ears, which had become a raging torrent as she realized the full extent of Jin-yao's perfidy, she felt information shaping into knowledge, possibly knowledge that might change events. If only she had told what she knew about her husband before this opportunity arose. . . .

But it was too late for that. Now she needed to seize what chance remained. Gao had been pointing the way to something. Grateful for the sympathy of these strangers, she drew a deep breath.

"What do you think Jin-yao wants to make of this situation he's created? Be frank. Don't be afraid of hurting my feelings."

Does he really intend to have his only child, our only child, executed? I believe he's capable of it. Could anyone else believe the same?

The young man said didactically, "The story is that your daughter killed this man by strangling him and intended to make off with his money. Correct?"

"Yes."

"Luckily he fought back and broke her nail on the cloth, so it bled. They were able to identify the killer from the bloodstain. Presumably she didn't realize what she had done."

"I suppose so. It sounds like the kind of line he would take."

"Mm-hm." Gao looked thoughtful. "Did he have a sample of your daughter's blood? Do you?"

After what felt like half an eternity a nugget of hope glittered in the recesses of Qing's mind. She said slowly, "Yes. Yes to both. Maybe this was what gave him the idea. When he first decided to become the agent for the Swiss blood-typing machine he took samples from both Jiang and me. We were still living together then, though he was away in Beijing half the time. I remember he joked—sort of; he hasn't got much sense of humor—sort of joked that in the future they may find out how to revive the dead from tissue samples, so people will carry blood and skin from relatives to reconstruct them if they suffer an accident. Jiang was still in her teens then, and very grave, and she took the idea seriously and insisted that we must all keep samples of one another."

She drew a deep breath. "But how does it help?"

"Just a second." Gao held up a calming hand. "In the West, do they not

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have misgivings about the identification machines like this permit? We've been told they are as accurate as fingerprinting. All the papers have been saying so, no doubt since your husband took a stake in the manufacturers. In fact the more I think about it, the more I recall how well that idea has been publicized. But in actual truth, as I remember from one of the foreign medical digests my mother showed me, the best they've managed so far is to narrow down the trace to match about three or four hundred candidates."

Li stared. "Is that so?" he rasped. "Well, the information may be going to hospitals, but it's not what they're telling lawyers like me! We've been advised to trust it implicitly." He glanced at Qing. "Could that be your husband's doing again?"

She gave an empty shrug. "Possibly. The more I think about it, though, the more I'm afraid he's going to get away with it. What he's after is a spectacular case employing this gadget that he can exploit to make every police force in China demand one."

"It is true," Dou put in, "that the murder rate is rising. Even here in Mo Quan we have unsolved murders."

"Yes, but . . ." Qing licked her lips. "I'm only beginning to realize how efficiently he has trapped Jiang." Visions of her, pretty and pitiable, sprang up in her mind. "And of course any attempt I may make—which can't be much because I'm poor—anything I can do will be ascribed to maternal defensiveness. I'm sure he's put it about that I'm a bad mother. That's why they showed the film of her swimming topless. For years, decades, letting oneself be seen in public like that has been associated with foreign wickedness, capitalist influence, even drugs, and the other sorts of corruption you mentioned, Dou." She clenched her fists. "And you know something? I haven't even got his phone number! I haven't even got my *daughter's* number!"

"That's a minor problem, Qing." It was the first time Gao had addressed her in familiar terms. "But in your view what are his main aims? One, to get rid of Jiang, and two, to secure a market for his machines?"

"Yes, but—"

"Bear with me. This is a silly question but I have to ask it. Are there any computers here?"

Dou exclaimed. "Goodness, scores! In the hospital, in the schools, all over the place!" She hesitated. "As a matter of fact we have one right in the house. For our daughter's education."

"I'm sorry I had to ask. But it varies so much in different parts of the country, you know." He drew himself together.

"Well, with access to a computer and the equipment we brought in, which is due to be tested tomorrow in ways that are entirely at my discretion before it is handed over to the army and consecrated to official business . . ."

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He let the words hang in the air. Qing, though, was already there. She pursed her lips.

"Brilliant! Oh, brilliant! How long do you have for this testing?"

Gao shrugged. "It depends on how long I can pretend to find problems. In fact the gear will have been tested at the factory to battlefield conditions. The best course would be for me to fake some sort of handshaking error when turning it over to civilian comms. That wouldn't be hard. We have some very weird equipment still in service."

"There's one other thing you could do," Li said after a pause. They glanced at him. He gave a nervous cough.

"What?" Gao demanded.

"Well, since he attained cabinet level your husband has been the subject of at least two western-style promotional programs on TV. Each of them presented him as an art connoisseur. Is that true?"

"He'd like it to be," Qing said sourly. "In fact he knows more about what art is in style at the auction rooms and how much it's fetching."

Li gave a thoughtful nod. "That's the impression I gained. He cares for the value of the money, not the value of the artist's work. Is that right?"

"Yes!"

"Well"—another hesitation—"you do know, don't you, that we have Fu Yi's remaining pictures here in Mo Quan?"

"What?" Qing jolted in her seat as from an electric shock.

"Yes. There was an old man who ran a print shop near here. Fu Yi was down on his luck at the end of his life and wound up paying a farmer for food and lodging with all the pictures he had left, including many he had drawn when he was young. He died, the farmer died, the farmer's widow sold the pictures to a printer and he used a few. Only the Cultural Revolution began before he had copied more than half a dozen, so he hid them."

"What are you suggesting?"

"The old printer," Li said, "was Dou's father. The lot belongs to us. We've been looking for a way to ensure the pictures are fairly handled. On hearing you were to come here we decided to approach you for help because people in Beijing might be interested, no?"

"Oh, definitely! But what does this have to do with. . . ?" Her voice trailed away. After a pause, she swallowed hard.

"Yes, my husband would very much like to get his hands on a slice of the proceeds. Greedy as he is, the possibility might well distract him from the counter-attack we seem to have in mind. And once he has been exposed, news of the cache of pictures—"

"Will be so widespread no one would dare to try and steal the profits." Gao spoke with authority. "Yes, it's one of the techniques we are taught in counter-insurgency work: if you want to plant and spread a rumor, the best way is to attach it to something sensational and preferably true."

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"Cabinet minister frames innocent daughter for murder," Dou murmured. "Is that not true as well?"

"Yes, but who's going to believe it from cold? If he has been implicated in an attempt to make off with the Fu Yi pictures, though . . . Qing?" Li glanced at her. She gave a firm nod.

"And you think we shall be able to sell the pictures for a fair price afterward?" Dou asked.

"Much better than at present. No doubt of that at all."

"Then let's work out what needs to be done."

"Yes, right away," Qing exclaimed. "Lieutenant Gao, you seem to have a plan in mind already."

"We shall need to publicize as widely as possible the shortcomings of these blood-tests. I presume you can tell us who in the government would support and spread the data?"

"Yes, and what's more, if you can use your machines to contact foreigners via satellite we could have messages sent to important departments all over South China. Messages from abroad carry more weight in a case like this." She was growing excited. At first she had imagined there would be no chance of saving her daughter once Jin-yao spun his deceitful web. Now she was abruptly optimistic. And it came with the bonus of revenge, too. She had not realized until now how much she wanted revenge.

"It's no use simply getting medical reports sent," Dou warned. "We need to have statements from reputed experts broadcast on satellite TV. More people watch foreign programs than our own, you know, when they get the chance."

"That's right," Gao confirmed. "Even in the army, all the time you hear about the foreign television that the soldiers like to watch."

"If only we could use Internet connections . . ." Qing sighed heavily. But the government monitored the Net and the World Wide Web with all the resources at their disposal, and even western companies, whether security firms or owners of copyright they desired to police, often visited China and sometimes bought Chinese techniques.

"We could make a mistake during testing," Gao said softly. "There's no telling what new equipment like ours is going to do before you connect it up."

"But surely—" Li broke in, blinking. He cut short the interruption.

"One of the things we can do is encrypt and decrypt all the common western ciphers. If you're going to use the phone links for ordinary purposes you can't avoid it. And this gear is intended to enhance the civilian phone system, you know." He hesitated. "As a matter of fact . . ."

"Out with it!"

"As a matter of fact, we could probably coax an off-duty computer to sneak a message on to someone's Host. Not during western working hours. Tomorrow night when traffic is growing slack?"

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Qing stared at him. After a short while she began to chuckle, and eventually to laugh aloud, while Gao sat there with an embarrassed grin.

"Message for you, comrade," Chan Jin-yao's aide said, delivering a fax to his desk.

For a long moment he seemed not to hear. He was preoccupied with visions of at last fathering a male child. He knew who the mother would be, too: a girl half his age, much more pliant than Qing who had so disappointed him, willing to undergo an abortion if the baby proved a girl, and try again . . .

But suddenly a name leapt out at him: Fu Yi, whose work had come so unexpectedly back into favor and now commanded prices as high as any Chinese artist of the past century. What was this about a stock of his unpublished pictures? Why, if he could get his hands on that lot. . . ! Which obviously he must, before anyone else did. Who was this from? Ah: someone properly cautious, giving only a number—in the area that had been called Nong Quan, he realized with excitement—and a time to call back tomorrow morning, moreover on one of the rare and expensive video links that outside the special economic zones only the army and the government could provide. Hmm!

Very well, it would be done. He so instructed his aide.

Asking if there were any news from Hainan, he was reassured. Like all his staff, the aide on duty was tied to his coattails by a network of favors, obligations, and bribes.

Which was why no one dared tell him of the trap closing around him until he rang up to inquire about the Fu Yi pictures the following day and found himself confronted by a stranger who smiled and nodded and presented in quick succession eight or nine unmistakable examples of the artist's work, indicating a further pile on a nearby table.

"You will wish to inspect them personally," the man said.

"Very possibly," was the answer in a bored tone. "If they are in good condition I could offer a reasonable price—five hundred apiece, maybe more." He could easily get ten times as much from an American or Japanese buyer, and as a senior minister he would have no trouble smuggling them out of the country. His spirits rose when the man in the screen beamed as though he had not dreamed they were worth so much.

"Ah, it is good to know the legacy of the great Fu Yi will be retained in China rather than exported!" he said warmly. "In a day or two we shall let you know where you can go."

Chan's mind was already busy with tracing the phone—though since it was an army videophone that would not be easy—and contacting police to go there and seize the pictures. The location was rural; it shouldn't be hard to identify the relevant officials and find out which would bend easily. Once the art was in his possession. . . !

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This was even better than trading in Swiss blood-analyzers.

He was much less amused when next morning he switched on a Taiwanese television channel, as he frequently did, to catch a news bulletin. As he hoped, it included a story about the murder Jiang was alleged to have committed. It was, however, not framed as he had ordered, although the Hainan police had had strict instructions, as had the local TV station. Of course, this was only a Taiwanese broadcast. Even so, it alarmed him to find it slanted not so as to emphasize his selfless pursuit of justice and his good sense in choosing to buy the Swiss machines that could identify any culprit by his or her blood-type, as toward his willingness to rely on devices that could only narrow down the suspects to within a few hundred, even when the life of his own child was at risk.

It was especially disturbing when the announcer called up a Japanese expert over a video link and elicited a warning that the jury must never rely on blood-type identification alone.

Well before he arrived at his handsome western-style office, Chan was severely worried. What the hell was going on? Naturally, anyone of his eminence in the Chinese power structure attracted a lot of attention; it had not, though, previously dawned on him that someone else might focus that attention.

It grew worse when among the morning mail—of various kinds—brought to his desk he found a pile of messages from foreigners. They all said essentially the same thing: "Dear Mr. Chan"—or the equivalent salutation in other languages—"Please don't assume your daughter is guilty on the basis of a blood-comparison! We are copying relevant data to help her defense, by fax and e-mail with more to follow."

These were not strangers. These were people whose names rang bells, loud and clear. He had had dealings with them. He had met them at international conferences in Beijing, Wuhan, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hong Kong. They boasted scientific qualifications after their names, their addresses were c/o famous universities or well-known companies, they had access to automatic translating machines that cost millions apiece. . . .

Why in heaven's name had so many powerful people come rushing to the aid of a worthless female, betraying her parents, betraying her father most of all, pretending to pursue a commonplace career in hotel management and using it to disguise her indulgence in goodness only knew what kind of debauchery. . . ?

Just a moment.

Suddenly his forehead was running with sweat. Here was a thick wad of paper, thicker than most of the others, which had come in later than the rest. It consisted of eight or ten sheets each bearing a blood-type pattern, annotated by hand in good Chinese script, pointing out the resemblances between examples derived from a computerized library of them—and the pattern of Jiang's own cells . . .

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He knew very well where the blood had come from on the scarf used to strangle the Filipino. With modern techniques it was fairly easy to copy and multiply a small original sample. Which of course he had.

But where the hell had this scientist-stranger found his?

Oh my God. Of course. My wife.

After divorcing her three years ago Chan had given little thought to Qing, except to make sure she would be well away from home on official business when his plot against the girl matured. He had completely forgotten about that time, so long ago, when he had joked about people in the future being able to re-create their ancestors from a scrap of tissue and serious, credulous Jiang had insisted they all take and keep samples of one another.

And no doubt Qing had made maximum use of her daughter's. After all, had he not had her sent to a country hospital with precisely what she would need to copy and distribute it? Not until this moment had it occurred to him that in the very same convoy there was the right kind of ultra-modern equipment . . .

"It's the *People's Daily* on the line, comrade," said his aide. "News of these unpublished pictures by Fu Yi seems to have aroused a lot of interest, apparently."

"What?" Chan felt confused. Too many things were happening at once.

"Yes, people have been in touch from Taiwan, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, even the United States."

"But why bother me?" he rasped. Meantime: *If only I had been able to silence the woman, if only she hadn't had the blood sample with her, if only . . . what's going to happen to the case against Jiang? Suppose the real killer drinks too much and boasts about his deed: what then?*

The telephone rang. On the line was the Beijing representative of the Swiss electronics company who had hired him as a useful pipeline into the Chinese medical procurement system. He was not happy about the way in which publicity about the machines' inadequacies was being spread around. Chan improvised some promises about putting a stop to that sort of thing, but even he didn't believe himself as he set down the phone.

Which gave his aide the chance to answer the blurted question of a few moments earlier.

"Well, comrade, because you were the first connoisseur given a sight of them. You saw them over a videophone yesterday and said they were valuable if they were in good condition, so Mayor Li—"

"Mayor of where?" Chan blurted.

"Mo Quan. It's in one of the valleys that Fu Yi called Nong Quan. As a matter of fact I was about to tell you. Your ex-wife is there. It's where the hospital is located that she is installing new equipment at. I assumed you would need help in preparing the defense for your unfortunate daughter,

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so I found out where she'd been sent. Don't worry, though. It's perfectly obvious from all the goodwill messages we've been getting that there are a hundred experts ready to testify the blood on the scarf could have come from far too many people to be taken as evidence. I told the police to get their fingers out and track down the real killer. Not, of course, that that'll help much, not if they fell for such plain stupidity as to believe an intelligent criminal would have hidden the stolen jewelry in her very own room!"

But that was supposed to pin the murder on her. . . .

The phones were ringing again, all of them. He braced himself as best he could, though the blood was rushing so loudly in his ears he could barely hear what the successive callers had to say.

If only Jiang hadn't been working at Hainan where there are so many foreign visitors and the police have to make sure justice is seen to be done!

But it was too late already. Here was the Hainan police chief now, expressing his reluctance to build a case on the blood-identification in view of the widespread international distrust of the machines' reliability, of which he had not previously been aware. And after that an indignant curator from one of the city's major art galleries demanded to know whether it could be true that he had offered such a small sum for hitherto unknown works by Fu Yi, and after that came a worried junior official from his own department who volunteered that his sister, who lived on Hainan Island, had heard a rumor that Jiang now claimed her broken bleeding nail had been torn by one of the policemen who dragged her out of bed and arrested her.

Broken, she meant, deliberately.

After which there were other rumors. Hundreds. Thousands. Keeping as brave a face as possible, he was most shaken by the worst of all: that he had personally arranged for the first of the blood-test machines outside Beijing to be sent to Hainan, ostensibly on the grounds that with so many rich tourists it would be a prime target for criminals.

Was that true?

What was true, indisputably, was that he had made just such an arrangement.

But it was not until the following morning that a sharp-eyed policeman spotted a sleeping drunk by the roadside, wearing a gold watch far too expensive to have been honestly come by. It proved to be the one missing from Jiang's "victim."

The drunk, roused from slumber, sang like a bird. They came for Chan within the hour.

"Your replacement will be here in the morning," Mayor Li informed Qing.

"In that case," Gao added, "you can ride back to Feng Gong with us."

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"I can't really believe it's over," Qing muttered, shaking her head. "Though of course it isn't. It's created such a scandal, it'll have repercussions for years to come."

"At least your part is over," Dou said comfortingly.

"Yes." Qing was staring into nowhere. "I wonder whether I shall know my daughter again, after so horrible an experience."

"Better you should be there for her than her father."

"Yes, I guess that's true. . . ." She snapped briskly alert. "Well, how about the Fu Yi pictures? Do you want us to take them for inspection and valuation as you first suggested?"

Dou gave a firm nod. "Who better could we trust? Though . . ." She glanced at her husband.

"There's one we would like to give to you, for yourself or perhaps your daughter." He reached down beside his chair. "I don't believe you know the title of this one. You read the inscription, but Fu Yi gave it a name, as well, a sort of motto." He displayed the picture of the boy holding the leash of the stuck pig, brilliant with reflected red.

"You mean. . . ? Why, I'm overwhelmed!" She took it in gentle hands. "But what is the title, then?"

Li gave a faint, crooked smile. He said, "'Do not Judge Him by the Blood.' I think that's appropriate, don't you?"

Qing could only nod. There was silence for a moment until Gao gave a sudden snorting chuckle. They stared at him.

"I was just thinking, Qing," he explained. "The question you asked on the way here."

"What question—? Ah! Who's planting next year's rice?"

"Exactly. Well, we now know someone who will be, don't we?"

"Oh yes!" She beamed. "And won't it do him a power of good!"

They basked in the reflected possibilities for a while. Then Dou rose and made for the kitchen, promising tea. ●

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Our Brave Terranaut

Our brave terranaut
crawls out of the Silurian sea,
hesitates in the splash zone—
the light is too bright! air sears!
sand is rough! gravity crushes!
Yet, ahead, the prize beckons.

Our brave terranaut,
joint-deep in matted slime,
sorts through plant detritus,
hurries away—slips gratefully
back into the sea's familiar warmth,
into its buoying embrace.

Our brave terranaut
comes home, trophy in chitinous fist,
signals with its bit of seawrack
to the envious and the curious
and all the other stay-behinds—
Nothing *to* it! nothing to it *at all!*

—Steven Utley

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An inarticulate father and a willful young boy have an unexpected chance to communicate in Ian R. MacLeod's haunting tale of . . .

THE ROADS

Ian R. MacLeod

I'll always believe that my father came back from the front late in the summer of 1917. I could barely remember the time when he'd lived at home, and his visits on leave had been brief, strained, somehow theatrical. He'd hand me creased-over postcards of foreign towns—a few of them even had unsent messages on them, my name and address—*We're busy here taking a bash at the Hun.* And I'd stare at them as he stood in the front room and placed his hands on my sister Marion's shoulders and said how she'd grown. My mother would wait in the corner—nodding, smiling, lost of words, really, as we all were. I half-feared him, this green-clad man, filling our front room with his own rough scent and that of trains and disinfectant. Little as I was, I resented him, too. I liked being the only male in the house.

He'd change soon afterward, bathing with his back shining though the open scullery door before putting on the clothes that fitted him so loosely now. My mother then ran an iron, steaming and spitting, along the seams of his uniform to kill the lice. Then tea and a cake from one of the neighbors, and everyone smiling, grinning. The house frozen with half-finished words and gestures, our figures blurred as if in a photograph, fanning wings of limbs, faces lost from all sense and meaning. Each night that my father was at home my mother's bedroom door would be closed and I would lie prisoner in the unloved sheets of my own bed, praying for that last morning when the cardboard suitcase reappeared in the hall.

"You'll take care? You'll look after Ma and Marion for me?"

I'd nod, knowing it was just his joke. And he'd stoop to hug me, encased once more in green and brass and buttons. The pattern remained the same over the war years; as much a fact of life as rules of grammar or the rank smell that filled our house when the wind blew east from the tanneries; and each time my father and the cardboard case he brought with him seemed smaller, more sunken, more battered. It was only late in the

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summer of 1917, when the war, if I had known it, was soon to end, that any of that ever changed.

I was wandering in the town arboretum. You had to pay to get in in those days but I knew a way through the railings and I was always drawn to the bright scents and colors, the heaped confections of flowers. There was a lake in the center—deep and dark, a true limestone cavern—and a small, moldering steamer that had plied prettily and pointlessly between one shore and the other before the war.

Each day of that changeable summer was like several seasons in itself. Forced outside to play by our mothers between meals, we had to put up with rain, wind, sunshine, hail. In the arboretum—watered and warmed, looming in flower scents, jungle fronds, greenish tints of steam—everything was rank and feverish. The lawns were like pondweed. The lake brimmed over. I remember wandering along the paths from the white blaze of the bandstand, ducking the roses that clawed down from their shaded walk, pink-scented, unpruned; sharing in that whole faint air of abandonment that had come over our country at that time.

I saw a man walking toward me. A mere outline against the silvered lake—but clearly a soldier from the cap he wore, from the set of his shoulders. I stopped. I could tell that he was walking toward me, and I felt a faint sinking in my heart even before I realized that it was my father.

"I thought I'd find you here," he said.

"Where's your case?" I asked.

He considered for a moment, his eyes hidden under the shadow of his cap. "I left it down at the station. Yes," he nodded to himself, "left luggage. My, you've grown . . ."

"You haven't been home?"

"I thought I'd come here first. See you."

I stared up at him, wondering how he could possibly have found out, all the way from those sepia-tinted postcard towns in France, about my habit of squeezing in through the arboretum railings.

"We weren't . . ." I began.

"Expecting. No." My father breathed in, his mustache pricking out like a tiny broom. He seemed as surprised as I was to find himself here, but apart from the sunlit air and the birdsong and the sound of a child crying not far off in a pram, we were back straight away within the frozen silences that filled our front room. And this time he hadn't even remembered the postcards—they were always the first thing he gave me. More than ever, I wondered why he came back. All that traveling. Wouldn't it be simpler if he just stayed in France and got on with the war?

"I'd forgotten how nice these gardens are," he said as I began to walk with him. "What's it like here, son?" I felt, unseen behind me, the brief touch of his hands on my shoulders. "Does everyone hate the Germans?"

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"They're bad, aren't they?"

"Bad . . ." My father considered, turning the word over in his mouth. "I suppose you could say . . . but then . . ." It was unnerving; what I'd said seemed to mean something else to him entirely.

"Do you see many of them?"

"No," my father said. "I just build the roads."

I followed him out of the park through the turnstile.

"Are you hungry?" he asked. "Do you think we should eat? Is the Mermaid Café still open?"

We crossed the street and walked past the old bakery into town. Carts and cars and horses went by. My father stopped and stared blankly at one driven by a woman. "Will you look at that? It's a different world here," he said, "isn't it?"

I nodded, already filled by the impression that I would remember this day, that these odd half-sensical things he was saying would become like the messages on those unsent postcards. Something I would study long after, looking for meaning.

It was growing darker now, the sun fading behind Saint Martin's church up the hill. A trolley bus went by, the sparks thrown by the gantry looming suddenly blue-bright. Layers of shadow seemed to be falling. It even felt cold now, so soon after the sun.

Across the square and through the doors of the Mermaid Café there was brass and linoleum, clattering cutlery, drifts of tobacco and steam. My father removed his cap and walked between the chairs. The gaslamps had been turned up against the sudden gloom, and I saw his face—darkly, yellow-lit—for the first time. The women sitting at the other tables smiled and nodded. A soldier. How they all loved soldiers then! A waitress who'd been about to serve someone else came over and took his order for tea and cordial, two sticky buns. He jumped when the trolley rumbled up. Outside, it started to rain.

"This is some place," he said, looking around in that same puzzled way he had in the arboretum. "It's what I think about, places like this. When I'm . . ." He began to pat his pockets.

"Building the roads?"

"The roads . . ." He found his cigarette case. He cupped a match. His hands were trembling. "Yes, the roads."

I drank my cordial, which tasted bitter rather than sweet from the saccharine they put in it. In the yard at school, I always just said that my father was a soldier. Sapper sounded like a corruption, a diminution—as did the actual job, which was the same one he'd done in peacetime, of supervising the construction of roads. But still; the roads. I had, in my own secret moments, in times when I lay in that deep indentation in my mother's bed and the ceiling glowed with the pull of sleep, a vision of a man younger and crisper than the one who sat before me now, and of the

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roads. White roads, straight roads, wide roads narrowing into the shimmering distance. Ways to the future.

"This war," he said, drinking his tea, "isn't like anything anyone ever imagined. All the money that's been spent, all the lives, all the effort. It's like one great experiment to see just how far we can go." He ground out his cigarette. "Well, now we know. The ones of us who are there. You think the whole world's there until you come here and you see the prams in the park and the women with mud on their skirts. And that steamer . . ." He smiled and glanced out at the rain. "I'd like to have taken you across the lake on that steamer."

"It's not working."

"No," he said. "And we should go home . . ."

He stood up. The waitress came over to take his money, fluttering her brown eyes.

Outside, the gutters streamed and the façades of the blackened buildings shone like jet. I wanted to hurry as my father pulled his cap on and walked at his odd slow pace through the rain, his head held stiffly erect. Trickles began to run down the woolen neck of my vest, but at least we weren't heading back toward the station. The suitcase was forgotten.

We walked up the hill toward the houses, but instead of going left toward home along the alley at the back of Margrove Avenue, we went on past the grocers on Willow Way. A black, sodden cat, waiting on a doorstep, regarded us. Around the corner, we came to a brick wall.

"Isn't this right?" My father pressed his hand against it, as though expecting it to give way.

I said, "We should have turned left."

"Isn't there a short cut?"

Before I could answer, my father turned and strode off toward a strip of wasteland and some leftover foundations of houses that had been started before the war and would, so we were all promised, be finished as soon as it ended. The rain was torrential now. You could hardly see the grey roofs of Blackberry Road, and as we began to pick our way over sodden nettles, our feet slipped inch by inch deeper into sucking mud. I tripped and stumbled over broken bricks, piles of rubble, loose rusting wire that had once been put up to keep out trespassers. Deep brown pools had formed in the depths of the foundations. I felt my feet slide beneath me, muddy gravity drawing me down into the water. I kicked away and heaved myself over slippery bricks. Peering back over the wasteland, I saw that my father was some way behind, grey again as the figure I had seen walking up from the lake, stumbling in the curtains of rain. I looked toward the houses of Blackberry Road. Grey water filled my eyes, my heart was pounding. For a moment, they didn't seem to be there.

"You go on, Jack!" My father's voice. "Hurry home."

I clambered on, back over the last of the foundations and onto the loose

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clayey track that the builders had laid. I could see rooftops now, sooty chimneys intertwined with the clouds, coalsheds, sodden washing, ivied walls. I broke into a run, taking the narrow passage between 23 and 25. Then on around the corner. Across the shining street.

I burst in through our front door. My breath came in heaving shudders as I stood dripping in warm darkness. The hall clock ticked. My mother was in the kitchen. I could already smell milk and nutmeg from the pudding she was cooking.

"That you, Jack?" she called. "Get those boots off. I don't want you clumping around the house . . ."

I struggled with the laces and left my boots on the tiles beneath the coatstand. I walked into the warm brightness of the kitchen.

"Where have you been?"

I looked back along the hall, willing a shape to appear at the mullioned front door. But already the sun was brightening, shining in the diamonds of colored glass, chasing away the rain. And Marion would be back soon, and tea was nearly ready.

I asked, "Have you heard from Father?"

My mother was rubbing my wet hair with a towel. "Your father . . ." The movement of her hands became stiffer. "No. He's always been bad for writing letters." She gave an odd laugh. Her hands dropped away. I felt loose, light-headed. "He *thinks*. You know he thinks, Jack . . ."

"I was just thinking—"

"And you're like him." She pushed me out of the kitchen, upstairs, away. "Now go and change."

I got a card from my father a few weeks later. It just came in the post. The censor had run a black line through the name beneath the photograph, but you could still read the print if you held it to the light. Ypres, but I pronounced it the way the soldiers did—*Wipers*; a famous enough name, although the newspapers reported that the great victory in Flanders of 1917 was at Passchendaele, and it was some years before I realized that my father was involved in that last great push and not some sideshow. Given the choice, I always seemed to draw the lesser verdict of him. And in his cause of death, too, which remains vague to this day. But then there were no proper roads in Flanders in the late summer of 1917. The rain never stopped. Many of the advancing allied soldiers simply drowned in fetid mud.

I still believe in what happened in the arboretum on that sunny-rainy day, although Marion, who died in the flu epidemic not long after the war, would have laughed and taunted me about it if I'd said anything to her, and I couldn't ever think of a right way of telling my mother. The sense of the ordinariness was too strong; of wandering into town and sitting, as I am sure I did sit, in the Mermaid Café with my father, although

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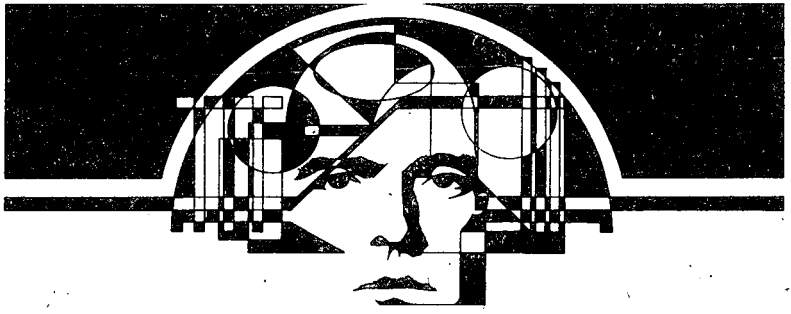
it's been closed for many years now and I never did find that brown-eyed waitress again, or any of the other people there who might have recognized us.

The little steamer that my father had so wanted to take me on crossed and re-crossed the arboretum lake again for a few years after the war, although I could never quite bring myself to take the aimless journey. Still, I was there when it sunk one pastel winter evening in 1921. I stood amid the onlookers on the shore, biting my lip and with my hands stuffed hard into my pockets as it tilted down into watery caverns wreathed in smoke and steam, set alight by a nameless vandal. Inside my coat that day, crumpled as my trembling fingers gripped it in the hot darkness, was a sepia-tinted picture of the square of once-pretty Ypres, and my name and address on the other side. I think that someone must have found that last postcard after my father died and posted it to me as a kindly thought, because the rest was simply blank. There was nothing but an empty space where my father, if he had survived and got back to the shelter of his dugout on that sunny-rainy day, might otherwise have left a message. ●



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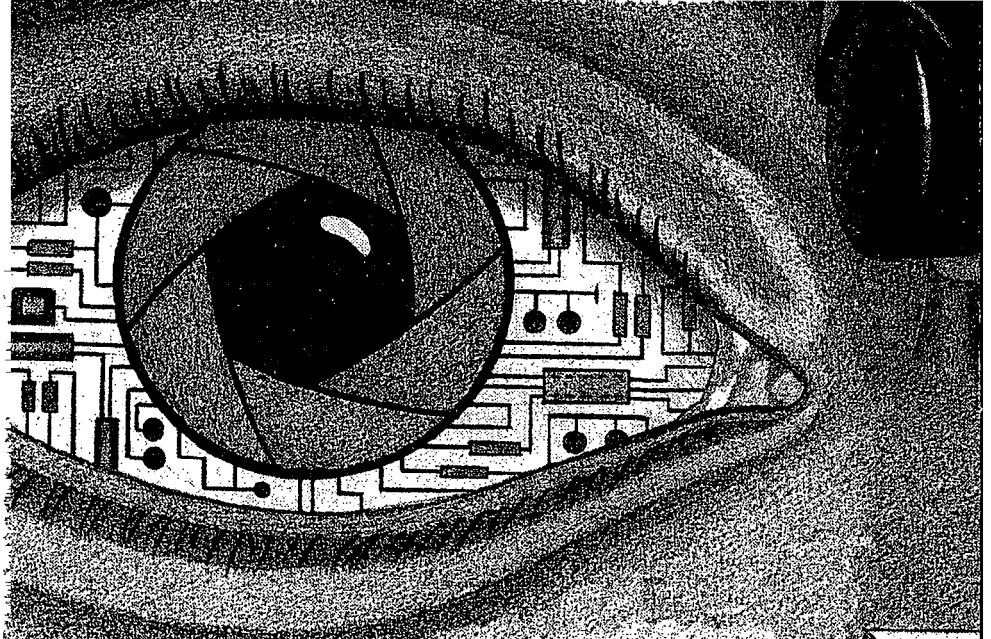

L. Timmel Duchamp

QUINN'S DEAL

Since her first sale in 1989, L. Timmel Duchamp has had more than a dozen stories published in a variety of magazines and anthologies, including *Full Spectrum 4*, *F&SF*, *Realms of Fantasy*, and *Asimov's*. In 1994, her story, "Motherhood, Etc.," was shortlisted for the Tiptree Award. Lately, Ms. Duchamp has been doing some free-lance editing of medical research papers, and she's just returned from two weeks of solitude in the Canadian Gulf Islands where she spent her time "dwelling among eagles, frogs, goats, sheep, and horses, and writing."

Illustration by Dwayne V. Wright

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Quinn awoke; and he found a robotic arm positioned over him, literally in his face. He blinked several times, and pried open his lips. (His mouth was dry and grotty, his tongue thick and furry.) He twisted his head and saw at once from the robot's cosmetic design that it was a med-bot. He cleared his throat and worked at getting his saliva flowing. To make the robot understand him, he'd have to speak clearly. "Where am I?" he said. (He was dismayed to hear the words come out like mush.) "And what am I doing here?"

"L. Quinn, you are sufficiently recovered to be discharged," the med-bot said in the tone of robot speech designated "friendly informational." The tone struck Quinn as infuriatingly, inappropriately casual.

"Discharged from what?" Quinn said, a little more clearly. A motor somewhere on the robot whined, and a thinner, shorter limb, which Quinn only now noticed, retracted from his forearm. The sudden lifting of pressure and the sensation of air brushing his skin made Quinn feel exposed and shivery. He realized that his shirt had been removed. He struggled into a sitting position and glanced down at his arm. The skin, he saw, had been bruised.

"This is the Indigent ER Unit," the robot said. One of its arms forked over his stinky, sweaty T-shirt. "Your condition is stable. You cannot stay here."

Quinn pulled on the shirt. ER unit. Med-bot. Yeah, it was coming back to him. He'd been feeling under the weather all day, and by six, when he clocked out, really, really sick. He'd been drinking water like crazy, because of what he'd figured was a bladder infection. Then, jumping down out of the back of Eddie's van, he'd been hit with dizziness, cold sweats, and bad shakes. Got so convinced he was going to vomit, he'd dropped to his knees to do it, right there on the site. And everything had gone black. . . .

Quinn slid off the table, then—seeing stars—clutched at it. Man, he felt wrung out. Like he'd been doing Santa Clara for a week without coming down.

"Take the printout, L. Quinn," the robot said.

Quinn looked at the thing, and saw a narrow strip of flimsy spooling out of one of several different-sized slots that slashed the matte black finish of its "chest." Quinn had to work with robots; and because of the work he did with them, he felt suspicious of what this one was up to. And so his mouth and eyes scrunched as he tore the printout out of the slot, as though doing so was causing him pain.

The narrow strip of flimsy was about as crude as printouts got. *L. Quinn. Male. Uninsured. Age: 36. Admitted by Seattle Downtown Merchants' Authority to ER Unit 04.10.37; 18:23:44, condition diabetic coma. Diagnosis: Diabetes Mellitus. Rx: Insulin pump or gene therapy.* And that was it.

"Follow the orange stripe on the floor to the Bursar's Office," the med-bot said.

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Quinn felt a plunging sensation in his belly. He looked from the limp strip of printout dangling from his fingers to the med-bot. *Bursar's Office. Jesus!* What was he going to do? Diabetes was one of those things you had to deal with, or it killed you! Oh man, and on nine thousand dollars a year max (when he was getting work every day and weekends, which he hadn't been, at least not for all of January and most of February). . . .

"Follow the orange stripe, L. Quinn," the med-bot said. Quinn stared down at the floor. There were four different stripes that began just this side of the opaque plastic curtain drawn over the cubicle's threshold. Red, green, blue, and orange. Orange, he guessed, was for money. Or lack thereof. *Ain't no free lunches in this country, man. Like the man always says, entitlements are un-American, and almost came close to wrecking the country when people thought they had 'em.* Quinn started walking.

Quinn walked the orange line past the drab olive curtain into the corridor, and then right. They'd just have to take it out of his pay, a little bit at a time, he thought. Which would make things really tight. Room and board just about ate everything he made. And cable fees. And god knew he couldn't live without VR on Saturdays. Shit. The only solution would be to move somewhere cheaper. Courtney gave him such a good deal for what he paid her, it would be a maximum blow to his Quality of Life, for sure.

As Quinn walked, he saw both solid doors and more curtains, always the same plastic in the same drab olive, lining both sides of the corridor. The sound of someone shrieking grew louder and louder; he wondered that any human would ever choose to work in such a place, with such animal-like sounds that kept on, not like on the hospital shows on cable, where they were used for dramatic effect. It made him weaker, just hearing that inhuman screaming, but instead of pausing to get his strength, he walked faster, to get away from it. *Diabetes.* The truth was, his condition might be "stable," but his head was pounding, and his throat so parched he couldn't stop coughing to try to kill the tickle there.

The orange line took him through an intersection, where he saw a door marked "MEN." Quinn shoved it open and blinked at the sudden sick glare. It was empty. Above the sink was posted the usual sign warning that the water was not potable. Squinting, Quinn found the video camera in a cage suspended in the corner a couple of feet below the ceiling. *Got the right john all right, the one for the "public."* He stood at the urinal, unzipped, and only a few seconds into the itchy, burning passage of piss forgot, in the relief to his bladder, the camera. Feeling marginally better, Quinn followed the orange line right, through the intersection, and down another long corridor (marked at intervals, he saw, with robot locator chips, which he assumed he just hadn't been alert enough to spot in the other corridor).

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A closed, slate-gray steel door with "Bursar's Office" stenciled on it, where the orange line terminated, lay at the very end. The automated teller in the wall to the right of the steel door greeted Quinn. "Welcome to the Bursar's Office. Please insert your Public Identity Card in the intake slot, magnetic strip down." Hearing footsteps, Quinn glanced over his shoulder. Another traveler along the orange line, he presumed. Quinn swallowed, and pulled his wallet out of his back pocket. *This is probably the worst place to pass out, if you're going to. Even if it's just an ordinary faint, they'd probably charge just for taking your pulse.* His sweaty fingers trembled so badly that it took him three tries to get the intake to accept the card.

"L. Quinn, you have incurred charges of $625.95. According to the data on your personal identity card, you have no medical insurance. Therefore you will please authorize the debiting of that amount from your First Interstate account by pressing the red button marked 'AUTHORIZATION' and placing your palm on the palm reader plate."

Quinn broke into a cold sweat; he felt so nauseated he thought he might vomit. (Just like he had only seconds before he'd passed out.) "Uh, look," he said. "I, well, I can't do that. I can't authorize the debit. There's not much more than that in my account right now. And my pay period has about three weeks to run yet." Quinn grew painfully conscious of the woman behind him, waiting to use the teller. He *hated* having to conduct his business in front of other people.

"L. Quinn, please stand by. A manager will be out shortly, to assist you." The teller beeped and his plastic card popped through the outtake slot.

Quinn stood away from the machine to let the woman behind him take her turn. "Welcome to the Bursar's Office," the teller at once began its spiel. Quinn glanced around. The Bursar's Office did not, of course, provide chairs for people who had need to wait. He was dead, zombie-tired. No way was he going to go on standing, for all that the teller had used the word "shortly." He dropped to the floor and propped his back against the rough, cinder-block wall (painted, of course, a screamingly impatient orange). As far as he knew, only Harborview had an indigent ER unit. That must be where he was. In which case he'd have to catch two buses to get home. Man. He was always zombie-tired at the end of a long day's work. But he couldn't remember ever feeling *this* tired (except, of course, when coming down off Santa Clara, which he hadn't done for five years at least).

Quinn waited for most of an hour. Again and again he opened the little strip of paper he kept folded in a tiny square and read the verdict. *Diagnosis: Diabetes Mellitus. Rx: Insulin pump or gene therapy.* Several times he considered setting out in search of a vending machine so he could get some water, but each time decided he didn't want to risk missing being

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called. As he waited, a steady trickle of people came to use the automated teller—to be taken to the cleaners, Quinn thought—but to his surprise, none of them required the "assistance" of a manager. They all either had insurance or (apparently) no problem paying the sums demanded. *Assistance, right. They figure they need a human to really turn the screws, the way a robot isn't slick enough to do. Pay now, or we'll go to court, which will mean paying two or three times as much by the time we're done with you.* And of course they had to be careful what things they programmed a robot to say. Though you couldn't hold a human responsible for saying certain things if the human claimed they were "slips" or whatever, everything a robot said could (if one had the resources, which people generally did not) be held up to scrutiny. Lies used in deal-making constituted fraud—if the liar were caught.

The trick, Quinn thought, was spotting the lies as they were mixed in with the truth. He wasn't on familiar turf here. He was going to have to operate on guesswork and instinct. *They wouldn't lie about the diabetes. I mean, I have the flimsy. They surely wouldn't lie about that, man, would they?*

His grandmother, he suddenly remembered, had had diabetes. That was the whole point of the scene in the VA hospital, the whole point of his Uncle Kenny going to jail afterward. . . . Diabetes, he thought, had a good chance of being in his genes.

When the steel door opened, a robot hovered on the threshold and called Quinn's name. Quinn got to his feet, but had to stand against the wall for a few seconds, until the blackness and stars had receded. Then he followed the robot into a little reception area smelling of old, burnt coffee. "Mr. Penneman," it said, "will see you now."

Quinn glanced around, found the closed, pebbled-glass door stenciled "Philip Penneman, Ph.D.," and walked on wobbly legs to it. He flashed on the scene—of which he had seen a CNN tape—of his uncle holding the grenade in the VA operating room and saying over and over and over like a mantra, *She was a Gulf War vet, for godsake. It's her right, not a privilege, man.* Of course no one could get into any hospital these days without first being thoroughly searched for weapons. Even the smallest clinic was practically a fortress. The insurance companies had seen to that.

Philip Penneman, Ph.D., turned out to be a little blond man, probably in his late twenties, a regular exemplar of the style his Ivy League generation had made known as "The Preppy Look," which they had managed to take with them, after graduation, into the corporate workplace. His blond hair was worn in the usual preppy style—tight short "tuffy" curls adorning the crown, stubble on the sides and back, with long tuffy-curl sideburns. He sported the usual sorts of preppy jewelry, too—a rhinestone (or diamond) stud in one nostril, several elaborately worked gold

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and sapphire earrings dangling from both lobes, and more than half a dozen stoneless lacy gold filigree bands on his fingers. And—absolutely de rigueur for the preppy look—he wore the usual array of cosmetics: eyeshadow—an iridescent taupe, in this case—over not only his eyelids, but in the hollows under his eyes; shiny pink lip gloss; and matching pink polish on his delicately manicured fingernails.

The man flashed a big, white, toothy smile. "So sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Quinn," he said in an ugly, scratchy voice. (No future media star *here.*) "We had to run your specs through the computer, to see what sort of assistance, if any, might be available to you." He waved his pretty pink nail-tipped hand ever so languidly at the gray vinyl chair positioned to face the desk. "Please, do sit down."

Before I fall down? And what would you do then, little man? Send for a cleaning-bot? Quinn sank into the chair. The tickle in his throat drove him into a deferred spasm of coughing. He glanced around. Fancy offices often had water dispensers. If this one did . . . but Quinn saw only a lot of gray office furniture and silver-framed posters; proof, he supposed, of the occupant's chic. One of them featured a black-and-white photo of a beach strewn with an ugly clutter of washed-up junk, including a pair of mirror shades lying in the sand, reflecting back the agonized face of an obviously dead woman. (CINDY SHERMAN, SEATTLE ART MUSEUM, AUGUST 5-31.) Another, slightly more tasteful, though in Quinn's opinion no less kinky, poster showed what might or might not be a real live photo of a dancer (though if so, and not a computer simulation, he was one limber dude). (JESSUP PERFORMS, VERVE PRODUCTIONS, JAN 9, 10, 13.) Quinn recognized neither name. Though his gaze kept straying back to these posters throughout the interview, he figured a water dispenser would be a whole lot more desirable to have in one's office, and at least as high-status.

Penneman tapped a finger against the screen of his computer monitor. "Now as it happens," he said, "I've got good news for you, Mr. Quinn." He glanced at Quinn, and frowned. "Your data are current, I presume? You are still employed as an evacuation engineer?"

"Yeah," Quinn said cautiously. "That's right."

Penneman smiled again and nodded enthusiastically. "Wonderful. The good news is that we have a situation in which a patron will pay not only your ER expenses, but for the modification of your genes to eliminate the diabetes."

A new wave of nausea gripped Quinn's stomach. *A deal. Right. I've heard of those kinds of deals. Godawful drug trials, where they give you cancer in order to try to cure you.* Quinn said, "Uh, look. All I want is to arrange to pay off what I owe the hospital in installments. Say fifty bucks a month? Something like that?"

Penneman wagged his right index finger at Quinn. "I don't think you

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understand, Mr. Quinn. An insulin pump, which you'll need if you don't get gene therapy, will cost you six thousand dollars. Gene therapy for your condition will run you eight to ten thousand. Medication, on the other hand, which is far from satisfactory, will run you a minimum of four hundred dollars a month. The fact is, diabetes is a serious condition. Your coma must surely have demonstrated at least that much to you. Mr. Quinn, this is not something you can put off, like getting your wisdom teeth removed, or cosmetic surgery, or a chip enhancement." The little bastard! Quinn wished he had the strength to lean over the desk, grab the guy by his big white ruffled collar, and smear his lip gloss all over his fucking punky little face. "I understand all right," he said irritably. "I only got two years of college, but I'm not totally ignorant. *My* point is that I'm not interested in swapping one disease for another." He jerked his head toward the door. "Life and health go cheap in places like this. You guys see somebody like me coming, and a little light in your head goes off, saying *hey, we've got a live one here, ready for whatever we've got to throw at him*. There are deals, and there are deals." Quinn crossed his arms over his chest and sat up as erectly as his fatigue would allow. "I don't have that great a job, maybe, but I'm no chump."

Penneman's smile grew openly patronizing. "This isn't a cable show, Mr. Quinn, but real life. I realize the entertainment industry have given us a bad rap. What you don't understand is that we do our best to match up patrons with clients, in order to serve our patients. If you'd allow me to explain just what the situation is . . ."

Quinn, utterly dogged, said, "No drug trials, no experimental procedures, no disease."

Penneman said, in a supposedly earnest tone, "Agreed." (Quinn knew, though, not to trust any move or tone coming out of Penneman now: not when they were explicitly down to dealing.) Penneman leaned forward and spoke in a soft, confidential tone. "The situation is this. The patron would cover your expenses in exchange for having a very tiny chip implanted behind one of your eyes. That's all. You'd be covered for regular checkups with a neurosurgeon, to make sure everything stays in order. There's near-zero risk for complications. The patron gets to see what you see, and you get your genes cleaned of diabetes." Penneman ran the tip of his tongue over his soft, smooth lips. "Pretty neat deal, wouldn't you say?" (His smile was ever so gentle.)

Quinn tried to think. But he was so tired he couldn't make much sense of what such a deal would *mean*. He rubbed his eyes, as though it were literally a problem of *seeing* what the con was. "The whole thing sounds damned kinky to me," he said. "Either that, or crooked. Like maybe somebody's using me to spy or something. Or for some kind of weird, bent voyeurism."

Penneman leaned back in his high-backed padded chair. "If it helps, I

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can tell you the reason the patron supplied on the Search form." Tired as he was, Quinn caught the cagey wording. The medical aspects, he sensed, were totally aboveboard. It was the "patron's" purposes that were in question. Again, Penneman tapped a fingernail against the screen, and read, "Patron is a shut-in who does not get out. Patron believes that, seeing through the eye of an evacuation engineer, patron will see more of life than is otherwise possible." Penneman held his hands palm down a few inches above his desk, and spread his fingers. (The gesture reminded Quinn of old movies in which bimbo receptionists, having nothing better to do, painted their nails and then held their fingers out to dry in exactly that way.)

When Quinn did not immediately respond, Penneman added, "That sounds pretty square to me. You'd be performing a humanitarian service, with a great benefit to yourself. What I see in this situation, Mr. Quinn, is two potential Big Winners."

A regular little huckster, Mr. Philip Penneman, Ph.D. But of course the point was to sell all the indigent persons passing through his office a deal they couldn't refuse, right? As far as he and the system he served were concerned, offering indigents such deals was an act of benevolence. No way could anyone complain about exploitation here—not unless they wanted to face a charge of fomenting class warfare.

Quinn just wanted to go home. "Look, can I have a couple of days to think about it?"

"A couple of days?" Penneman said, letting his voice squeak in total incredulity. "I don't think you get it, man. This offer isn't going to be open for too long, especially to a person in your condition. Considering that you went into a diabetic coma this evening, you've got to bear in mind that putting off a yes-decision could be jeopardizing the very capacity the patron is interested in tapping. Capisce, my man?"

The rush of rage that surged through Quinn brought on a major, full-body case of hot, seething sweats. For the first time he thought of Uncle Kenny and his hand grenade with actual wistfulness. Maybe the old guys were right, maybe he had missed living in the last good times, when men still had a chance to fight the system. Maybe the Age of the Deal wasn't better. He'd always hated hearing that riff the old guys were always getting into, disgusting, self-pitying laments for the old "consumer society"; he'd always hated talk about how the younger generation shouldn't be making deals, but destroying their world with revolution, he especially got furious at the major jerks of the boomer and X generations telling his generation that they had nothing to lose but their so-called "fucking chains, man." Quinn's parents, in particular, ragged him every chance they got. They just couldn't forgive him for taking the Population Foundation's deal, trading his fertility for two years of college (and the decent job he'd been able to snag as a result). But then they had no sense of the

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deal, those old ones, still wrapped up in the idea that everything could be measured in money.

The deal. Right. Quinn might be pissed as hell at the preppy jerk sitting across the desk from him, but the deal was the issue, and nothing else. "I don't like dealing without sleeping on it at least a night," Quinn said. (As though, he thought, he'd be able to sleep, given all that was coming down.)

But Penneman stubbornly stuck; he would not be budged. (The advantage, after all, was his. And Quinn knew it.) After a few more minutes of sparring, Quinn yielded. "All right," he said. "All right. Let's have a look at the contract."

Penneman printed out the text, and Quinn read it, holding the paper in his ever-trembling, sweaty fingers. *These guys are so damned clever. I'm backed into a corner, and this bastard knows it. Well, at least the damned thing will be non-obtrusive. I'll never know it's there, except when I remember the deal. Says here in black and white that if there's any sign of damage, it's to be removed and all the damage is to be repaired at the patron's expense. All I have to do is forget it's even there. . . .*

Before Quinn left, Penneman set him up with weekend appointments in the hospital's gene therapy and cyber-impant departments. If everything went according to plan, he wouldn't miss so much as a day's work. "It's a great deal," Penneman said as he handed Quinn a voucher for a temporary supply of insulin patches from the hospital's pharmacy. "You're a spectacularly lucky guy, you know?"

Right. He was so lucky it took him an hour and a half of missed connections to get home. With luck like his, a guy could really go places.

By the time Quinn made it home—feeling the entire trip as though he were in danger of total collapse—he had worked out a necessity for secrecy. Ordinarily he spoke to Courtney Greenleaf without discretion or discrimination (except, of course, for those myriad minor—but self-revealing—sorts of things that one would never, in one's right mind, tell another soul). She was not only his housemate and landlord, but his friend (and just about the only one at that). Courtney was the least judgmental person he'd ever met, and he'd never heard her telling him someone else's secrets. He thought of her, fondly and with a slight bit of condescension, as a "saint"—meaning someone naïvely self-sacrificing and moral. And so all of the first bus home, and half of the second, Quinn imagined plopping himself down—late as it would be—on Courtney's old battered leather sofa and telling the astonishing tale of his evening's mishap, the reason for his having not come home directly after work (as he usually did). "You wouldn't believe this guy," he imagined himself telling her, while of course knowing she would know "his type" well enough to make much explicit description unnecessary. But as the bus

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glided into the U District and stopped before University Hospital, it struck him like a blow in the gut that anyone who knew he was having a spy-device implanted in his head would never feel safe around him again. Though they might not be thinking about it all the time, whenever they remembered they'd pull themselves up short, swamped with self-consciousness, wondering who might be watching them through Quinn's eye at that very moment.

And he lived in Courtney's *house.*

No. It might be dishonest of him, but no way could he tell people about that spy-eye. Anyway, he reasoned, it couldn't much matter since whoever was paying to have the thing implanted wouldn't know the identities of any of the persons he would be seeing. It wasn't like some secret police or intelligence agency would be using him. Even if the "patron" hadn't been telling the truth about why he wanted the spy-eye, visuals were just not that good, especially compared to audio transmissions.

And he, Quinn, was just an ordinary kind of guy. He didn't know anyone important. He didn't work in "sensitive" areas. And he suspected that the patron would soon become disappointed with the yield of the spy-eye, since in his work his visual input tended to be robots, empty buildings, and squatters. In his private life he mostly sat in front of the television, or hung out with Courtney, who was no great shakes to look at for chrissakes.

Still, he got a major case of the guilts the second he fit his key into the back door. The spy-eye wasn't yet installed, and he felt as though he were sneaking an unwelcome intruder into Courtney's house. His guilt increased when he saw the note on the refrigerator, saying there was soup, and to help himself. Most of Courtney's soups were good, and he was famished, so he hauled the huge old stockpot out onto the table, ladled some lentil soup into a plastic container, and warmed it in the microwave.

Soon the kitchen was full of the fragrance of spices and vegetables. Courtney appeared just as the microwave beeped and said, "There are cheese muffins in the basket, Quinn," then busied herself filling the teakettle from the slow-as-molasses filtered faucet.

Quinn grabbed a couple of muffins and considered what—if anything—he should say to explain his lateness. Courtney knew he didn't have a real social life. He did sometimes work this late, especially on Fridays, so he supposed he'd just let her assume that was what had happened.

Courtney thumped the kettle onto the burner. "When I saw you were going to be late, I set your VCR to tape your faves," she said.

Soup, sitcoms, the works. That was Courtney for you. (And she didn't even like sitcoms herself.) "Oh, man, thanks, Court," he said, shaking a few drops of hot sesame oil into the steaming bowl of soup. "I mean, that's really, really cool. I do appreciate it."

Courtney frowned. "You look like you've been up three days and three

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nights. You must have had one hell of a shift." "I couldn't begin to tell you," Quinn said with considerable discomfort. He glanced at Courtney, then quickly away. She'd been his baby-sitter when they were kids. And though she was about eight years older than he, had always seemed just a regular age, not that much older at all. But over the last year or so it had become painfully obvious just how old she was. She didn't wear cosmetics, and had had no free-radical cleanouts, nor any cosmetic surgery, either. As a result, her face looked . . . puffy, or something. In strong light it drove him crazy. It seemed that right before his very eyes she was joining the old people, sliding into that big, ever-growing generation of has-beens.

Though of course she owned that house, her great aunt (an old-time feminist who'd never married) had willed it to her, and she had a job that wasn't likely to be yanked out from under her, so getting old wasn't going to be the totally dire problem for her it was for most people.

Quinn snarfed down the soup and muffins in front of the television, and drank down an entire liter bottle of water. Somehow, though he really really really wanted to be distracted, the sitcoms just didn't catch on. Instead he kept thinking about the med-bot, and the preppy, and the deal he'd made with the preppy, and the fact that there was no single person in the world he felt he could tell the horror to.

It was like a lump inside him, undigested. It was like a terrible guilty secret. It was like trading a deadly disease for another, less socially acceptable (but nonlethal) one. He imagined himself wearing a bell, like a leper of old, to warn everyone around him that they weren't safe in his presence.

L. Quinn, spy-eye. Or cat's paw. Or just plain pimp for a voyeur.

The implantation of the spy-eye took less than two hours. Mostly it was boring. The medical "team" (one med-bot plus the "supervisory tech" whose presence was required by hospital regs) told Quinn nothing, answered none of his requests for specific information about the procedure; clearly it considered nothing but streamlined efficiency of any importance whatsoever. Quinn suspected that the med-bot was not programmed to take substantive questions and that the supervisory tech was probably just a warm human body without real knowledge of what the med-bot was doing, and so could not answer questions. "You signed the informed-consent agreement," she said when he tried pressing her. "If your questions come out of those kinds of concerns, that was the time to be asking them. If they come out of mere curiosity and boredom, then they're inappropriate."

The deal was sealed, in other words, and getting medical info wasn't part of it. Quinn got the message, and settled down into the sensuwrap entertainment available during the first two-thirds of the procedure (ob-

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viously designed to keep him from worrying about what they were doing inside of his head). The skydiving scenario successfully diverted him for almost half an hour, but when he smelled the strange vanilla-like odor, tantalizingly familiar yet unnamable, he could not integrate it with the scenario, and so could not help wondering whether the smell was temporarily with him, or might become a permanent part of his consciousness, as a "side-effect" of the implantation.

By the time the med-bot had finished messing with the inside of his head, the smell had gone away. The med-bot then put him through a series of tests requiring his conscious participation. His vision was the same as always. Quinn stood before the mirror and examined his reflection as he hadn't done since adolescence. "Which eye is the spy-eye?" he asked anxiously, unable to see any difference in his appearance in the mirror, unable to feel any difference in his head or eyes.

The med-bot went into idle. Quinn had a brief fantasy of kicking it, of taking a hammer to it, but then thought of the kind of deal the hospital would extort from him if he did manage to damage it. The supervisory tech handed him a card. "You can go now, Mr. Quinn," she said. "If you notice any distortion of your vision, or any other neurological symptoms, be sure to call that number for an appointment. Otherwise, we'll send you a reminder for a recall examination in six months." The tech opened the door, stepped out into the hall, and gesturing, added, "You go right, and then take another right at the first intersection, and the main elevator will be right there."

"Which eye has the implant?" Quinn said angrily. "For godsake, it's *my eye,* lady, I have a right to know!"

The tech mustered a feeble, tepid smile that barely moved a muscle in her stiff, pasty pink face. "I'm sure you do have a right to know, Mr. Quinn, but I don't have the answer, and since some of the procedures we do here are performed in test cases, which require that the participants be uncertain of just what was done, even if I did know, I wouldn't be permitted to tell you without prior authorization."

Quinn would have charged straight down to the Bursar's Office to beard Penneman in his den, but he couldn't do that without missing the appointment that really mattered, in Gene Therapy. So he left the twelfth floor and went down to the ninth. The appointment was brief. All they did was take a lot of blood from him and tell him they'd be in touch as soon as they had done the analysis and were ready to make the repair. Quinn felt cheated, that the other side of the deal should pay off before his side. (But of course, Penneman had told him it would right up front.)

When Quinn left the elevator on the first floor, he found an orange line almost at once, and followed it to the Bursar's Office. The teller had a line of about half-a-dozen people. While Quinn waited, he began to doubt that the teller would grant him access to the inner office just to have a ques-

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tion answered. Silently he phrased and rephrased sentences demanding that he be allowed to speak to Penneman. The teller was a machine; it would respond only to a limited number of key expressions. Perhaps he ought just to ask for human assistance, and then when the robot opened the steel door to admit him, simply make a break for Penneman's office?

After about fifteen minutes, Quinn got his turn. "Welcome to the Bursar's Office. Please insert your Public Identity Card in the intake slot, magnetic strip down," the teller said.

Quinn cleared his throat. "I require human assistance," he said.

"Pfease insert your Public Identity Card in the intake slot, magnetic strip down," the teller repeated.

Quinn sighed. The damned thing was probably programmed to ignore comments made before plastic was inserted. That made sense. Quinn fed his card into the intake slot.

"L. Quinn, your account has a balance of zero." The machine beeped; Quinn's plastic card popped back through the outtake slot.

Quinn slammed his fist against the teller. "Shit!" he yelled.

The machine beeped again. It said, "Please remove your plastic identity card from the outtake slot."

Quinn snatched his card and went to stand against the wall. All right, he'd wait. Surely someone was going to need "human assistance" sometime soon. The people queuing slid him uneasy looks. He could almost see them wondering if he was a mental case who'd somehow gotten past security into the hospital, demanding treatment or drugs or something. . . .

Quinn waited fifteen minutes before he heard the teller instruct a woman to "stand by, a manager will be out shortly to assist you."

Quinn knew very well about the teller's loose use of "shortly." He settled down onto the linoleum for a long, uncomfortable wait. He knew he'd have to be ready to move when the steel door opened. *And then what? Alarm bells going off? Security arriving to drag me off to detention?* The very thought of being handled by security-bots chilled Quinn. Man, he hadn't gotten the gene repair yet. If they took him off to detention, he might never get it. The hospital wouldn't be required by the contract to see to it—only to provide it on its own terms. Man . . . it wasn't like he had nothing to lose. Man, he could lose his *life*. Go into a diabetic coma in detention, and he'd be heading for that old lime-pit in no time. They only took people to the ER when they were cluttering up the streets.

After about ten minutes of scaring himself dry, Quinn left the hospital quietly—and quickly. He knew all about the techniques of security-bots; he knew all about their programming; and he knew all about the attitudes of those who deployed them. Clearly, trying to crash the Bursar's Office was not the way to go. He'd get hold of Penneman, no question, but just not in that way. *And then what?* Quinn's inner demon queried. *You*

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think he's going to know, right off the top of his head, or be willing to find out for you, and then tell you?

God, he felt like a fool. A shrewder dealer would never have made the mistakes he'd made. And in Quinn's view, he had only himself to blame for making them.

Quinn spent the remainder of Saturday in a VR Parlor, participating in a multi-user Fiction. The fiction was based on *Pride and Prejudice,* and Quinn was pleased to get to play his second choice of character, Jane Bennet (Bingley being his first). He remembered the spy-eye in his head only at the most tedious of moments. The persons playing Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Mr. Collins hammed it up so grotesquely that every scene featuring them inevitably put the rest of the players in danger of reacting out of character. Self-styled comics and hams always messed up fictions based on old novels. But most people liked the old novels for the fun of the scenery and costumes more than anything else. One's real life and the rest of the world did not—could not—exist in those settings. Quinn simply loved them.

On Sunday, Quinn didn't remember about the spy-eye until well into the afternoon. Just as he spent most of Saturdays playing in one or two Multi-User Fictions, so he spent Sundays at his terminal, logged on to catch up with his e-mail, and then to cyber-socialize, and maybe read some hard news (which he couldn't stomach during the work week), or fiction. It was the beeping of the diagnostic patch the pharmacy had given him, beeping that warned him it was time to apply a new insulin patch, that made him remember. He looked away from his computer screen and glanced around the room, and suddenly had the strange sensation of someone else in the room with him, invisible to his sight, peering over his shoulder, seeing out of only one eye, but *seeing* Quinn's room, Quinn's *life.* It made him queasy, even a little dizzy, to see the room so strangely. It was as though it wasn't his room—simultaneous with his feeling utterly familiar and bored with it. It was like a strange experience of *déjà vu.* Only it was, of course, something else.

Quinn told himself he shouldn't be feeling anything. That it was a matter of his consciousness, nothing else. But a part of him began to doubt he had any reliable idea of exactly what that med-bot had been doing inside his head.

6:45 A.M. Monday, Quinn was already awake when the speakers on his console blared the workday baroque trumpet flourish (which though he had loved it when he selected it for the program, after a year's use made him curse now every time he heard it). "Morning, Quinn, morning, it's your wake-up call, man, from your old buddy Matt Winger at your very own wake-up call KMIX, the station that gives you the music you want,

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when you want it, and only the best of the good news of the day! Are you up, Quinn? Give us a carriage return, man, and we'll be on our way into the best of Mondays!" Oh the wonders of this wondrous age! Working drudges might not be able to afford to survive diabetes without cutting a down-and-dirty deal like the one Quinn had been lucky enough to be offered, but a personalized program from his FM station of choice was available to just about anybody able to afford legally sanctioned living accommodations. In a lean, mean competitive world, there were winners and losers, of course, and always far, far more of the latter than the former. There had to be some means of convincing drudges the struggle to stay employed was worth it. And in a rude, impersonal world, what better than a personalized FM service? If Quinn didn't like the style of the DJ, or the selection and phased mix of old classics (in Quinn's case a few bars of Bach here, a few of the Beatles there, some Beach Boys, Dolphy, and Mozart, all delivering a whacking great beat) the man had only himself to blame. The defaults were all his choice.

And he knew it.

As for the best of the good news of the day . . . once Quinn hit the carriage return on his keypad, his system—through the joyful wonders of fiber-optics—plugged into KMIX's system, and alternated news and weather and time-checks with Quinn's personalized mix of music. (Anything to get him out of bed and out the door, man.)

"The good news this Monday, April 13, is that Siemens International has taken over Gregory Genetech, meaning that anyone with shares in Siemens are big winners, folks! Sorry, Gregory Genetech shareholders, and the University of Washington Biology Department, its major subsidiary. But all you biology graduate students and post-docs out there, look on the bright side! If you can't cut the competition now, you'll be shaken out sooner than later, which means you'll still have a chance to start over!"

Quinn scrambled into his clothes and checked to make sure he still had the card of insulin patches tucked away in his wallet. He wondered: what field did Penneman have his Ph.D. in? Business psychology? Administration? That kind of thing?

"The time is six fifty-nine," Matt warned. "Expect highs of between 80 and 85, and rain early this afternoon." But as if to belie the forecast, some of Quinn's personalized mix came pouring out of the speakers, beginning with the first few bars of the Beatles' "Here Comes the Sun." And as he was supposed to, Quinn felt galvanized and ready to face the day.

It being Monday, Quinn caught the bus to Ballard on the corner of Forty-fifth and Wallingford. Just about everybody seated was either wearing earphones or reading. Quinn remembered that he needed to get hold of a copy of that book of Chekhov stories. He'd reserved a role in the one they were doing next Saturday night, though he'd just selected a

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name in the cast list at random, since he'd never read the story in his life.

Half a block from his stop on Market Quinn picked up a double tall latte (his usual form of breakfast). He shoved his respirator down around his mouth so he could sip the latte through the slit in the lid and gazed into the windows he passed, appliances first, then a coffee shop (where most of the patrons were logged onto the super-glue bound terminals), then a funky old furniture and clothing store, then a jeweler's with night-empty shelves—and a security camera sweeping any and every passerby. . . .

At the sight of the security camera, Quinn remembered what he'd—incredibly—forgotten: that he, L. Quinn, was a walking clandestine spy-eye. Even when he'd checked to see that he had insulin patches on him, even then he hadn't thought of it.

I could hire myself out as a mobile surveillance camera. Only of course I'd have to figure out the transmission code first, which might not be all that trivial a thing to do. . . .

Monday mornings were 7:30 starts, but even so, Quinn was a few minutes early clocking in. As usual, Eddie, the site manager he usually worked under, had arrived before him. He was sitting on the edge of the conference table, looking over a file, when Quinn came into the briefing room. He stared a moment at Quinn, then got up and came over to him and slapped him on the back. "Quinn, old guy, how you *feeling,* man? I tell you, when you keeled over, I thought you must be having a heart attack or something, even young as you are. You okay, man?"

Quinn flushed. He hadn't considered what the crew must have thought, seeing him passed out like that, sick as a dog. . . . Suddenly he had to worry that McGuire, having been told, might have decided that a guy with such unreliable health was just too great a liability to keep on the payroll. . . . "Hey, I'm *fine,* Eddie, no problem, just a little blood-sugar thing, got it taken care of, all under control now, nothing *like* a heart attack, man, just this blood-sugar thing, you know?"

Quinn supposed that calling diabetes a "blood-sugar thing" wasn't, at least technically, a lie exactly. Vague to the point of disingenuousness, sure, but the problem was under control, and would soon be nonexistent. He slid a glance at old Dickie Price, seated in the chair you'd swear had his name engraved on it, down at the foot of the table. Old Dickie was, of course, bent over his pocket-sized electronic solitaire game, seemingly oblivious to the world. Other than the insides of the robots McGuire paid him to keep in order, Old Dickie cared for little but his solitaire game.

Eddie slapped the table with the flat of his palm, in apparently unconscious imitation of his boss. "Quinn, hey, I'm really really *glad* to hear that, you know? Because we've got this really big evacuation going this week, and keeping the pipeline open and the goodies flowing is in every way dependent on its going forward as planned."

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"Which evacuation is that?" Quinn asked, thinking that not even Eddie could describe the site they'd been working last week in such grandiose terms.

Eddie gestured Quinn to take a seat at the table. "You'll be hearing all about it in just about two minutes," Eddie said. "Mr. McGuire himself's going to be briefing us on this one." Eddie pulled out the chair opposite Quinn's and fixed one of his socializing-with-the-kid looks on him. "Good weekend, I hope?"

Eddie knew he was single, knew he'd never have kids, knew he thought most women were too unattractive to go out with. (All that dead space, in their days, spent waiting on the repair of machinery or the say-so of some higher-up, gave Eddie plenty of opportunity to interrogate Quinn on his private life.) But because he knew these things, Eddie had some kind of attitude about Quinn's life, or life-style, something between romanticization and pity (depending, Quinn thought, on how Eddie was feeling about the respectable married paternal life at the moment). At any rate, Quinn's weekends were, for Eddie, the territory of The Alien. Quinn shrugged and said, "Yeah, it was okay."

"VR parlor on Saturday, I bet," Eddie said.

Quinn shrugged. "Yeah, it's, you know, what I like to do."

Eddie hadn't been in a VR parlor since his son's birth. Parlor fees weren't stiff, and Eddie made a better wage than Quinn, but every cent Eddie and his wife made was needed for maintaining not only the child, but their respectability. And of course, since Eddie worked long hours weekdays, the weekends belonged to Family.

"What, you do one of those literary-type things again?" Eddie said.

Quinn tossed back the remains of his latte. "Yeah. A Jane Austen novel. Which was pretty cool, actually. You wouldn't believe how elaborately they do the settings and clothes for some of those fictions. I mean, it's like being in a movie—the finished product, I mean, not like an actor would see it, but really slick."

Eddie nodded. "Way over my head, though. Haven't read one of those classics since I was in school." He made one of those cute shooting-fingers at Quinn. "Guy like you should of been to college, Quinn. If anybody's cut out for it, it's you, pal. You ought to think about going back, finding some kind of deal to finance you. Brains like you got."

Quinn sighed. Some kind of deal, right. The kind a person would need like a hole in the head. Like a hole in the head? Shit. Wasn't that, really, what he'd gotten, with his gene repair deal? A hole in the head to stick in some kind of digital camera? So somebody could be looking at this very moment, at the big map of Seattle on the wall facing, just as he was, focusing only as well as he focused, whichever eye it was—*probably the right, because that's my best eye, my strongest eye, the one that's dominant, if that little trick they taught us in seventh-grade Health Class was*

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right, when you do the pointing thing, and then close each of your eyes to see which one stayed in line with the object you were pointing at—focusing on Belltown, then Queen Anne Hill, then Magnolia, all those streets, and all those little colored flags pinned to sites of interest to McGuire Development, Inc. Old-fashioned, to have a paper map with flags on it, as McGuire himself liked to say, but you could actually plant your fingertip right on the sucker, absolutely hands-on technology (ha ha ha—so everyone present always dutifully laughed at Mr. Daniel McGuire's so-clever pun).

"And how about you, Eddie. Did you have a good weekend?" Quinn asked politely.

Eddie launched into a tale of the two grandmothers' each going off to their fave weekend pursuits, and since it was not the hottest topic of interest for Quinn, he just zoned out during most of its narration. That Eddie, Quinn thought as he always did whenever he heard mention of Eddie's mother and mother-in-law both living in his house, was such a decent guy, a veritable sacrifice on the Altar of Family, a candidate for an early heart attack for sure! Quinn himself avoided going over to his parents' to the fullest extent possible. (Christmas he could not get out of, but he just sent cards with hearts and flowers on them for all the other occasions a filial response was required.) Quinn thought of the last time he'd allowed himself to be dragged to his parents' house to "celebrate" his own birthday. It had been his twenty-first, and his mother had been beside herself with excitement at giving him a videocassette of the "Beginning of your *life,* son, now that you're mature enough to handle it!" And it had begun with tape of an ultrasound, of his days as a fetus (spliced with deliriously joyful shots of his mother in the full bloom of pregnancy), and had culminated in the last hour of labor and delivery—of him, the promising baby boy (who got himself sterilized right after passing that birthday, which had incidentally marked the arrival of the legal age of consent).

The door opened and slammed back against the wall. The McGuire Mob (as Quinn privately thought of them) made its usual noisy entrance, followed by the thin old guy known as "Scavenger Jack." The latter, Quinn deduced, was late again (no doubt hung over), but could be sure that McGuire himself wouldn't bother to notice, since he liked to say that Jack was "above rubies." (Quinn wasn't sure what, exactly, it meant to be *above rubies,* but he suspected it was one of those phrases stolen from Shakespeare, with a context only college English professors could be expected to know.)

McGuire slapped a big thick manila envelope down on the table, and shoved it at Eddie. (Old Dickie quietly slipped his pocket reader into one of the pouches he carried on his belt.) "The writs you need, from King County," McGuire said. "Three hundred four evictions, and only six of 'em

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have accepted our offer of free transport to Zion Camp." McGuire perched on the table beside Quinn. "So, kid, what's with this business of passing out on the site like that, hey?"

Quinn swallowed, and made himself look the big, hairy, healthy man in the eye. *Man, nobody wears gold chains anymore. Somebody ought to tell this joker.* . . . "A little blood sugar problem, Mr. McGuire. Taken care of, won't happen again."

The man stared so hard at Quinn the latter had to glance aside, at McGuire Jr., to give himself a break. "We've got a heavy week lined up, Quinn," the man said. "Need your full 150 percent."

Quinn swallowed, and met the man's waiting gaze. "I hear you, sir," he said earnestly. "I'm totally up for the work."

McGuire nodded slowly. "Yeah, good. Don't want any weak links in the chain. Could wreck my whole business." He stared at his son. "Just remember that, boy. One broken cog and the whole thing goes to hell. Keep the wheels greased, at all times. Plenty of fish in the sea these days, you can afford to be picky. You hear?"

Mac Jr. rolled his eyes. "Yeah, Dad, I hear. Like for about the ten thousandth time."

McGuire ignored that. *Must be in a good mood this morning.* He jerked his thumb at the manila envelope. "The exact addresses are listed on the cover sheet inside, Eddie. It's a good section of that block on Summit East we bought up last summer. The evacuees should be pretty softened up, considering I had the power, gas, and water cut off last Thursday." *Great. Conditions will no doubt be unsanitary. My fave, absolutely.* "Got a couple of buses scheduled for nine." He sniffed. "I figure we won't get any Silent Witnesses this morning, anyway, so if anyone's cooperative, you can let them move their things out. Everybody else, straight onto the bus, and dump their crap in the dumpster, as per the ordinance." He rapped his knuckles on the table. "Questions?" He was looking at Eddie, as though he knew Scav Jack and Quinn wouldn't have any.

Eddie crossed his arms over his chest. "Several, Mac. Number one: power. Any way we can get it turned back on? Robots have a hard time dealing with stairs. Always takes a lot longer if we don't have access to elevators."

"Good point," McGuire said. "I'll see what I can do. In the meantime, work the ground floors, and be prepared to put up some ramps."

"Question two: if the power's been off, how do you know there won't be any Silent Witnesses? That kind of action usually brings them out in full force."

McGuire grinned. "Because. Most of them are in jail this morning. And the rest are likely to stick with the Belltown site, which they're totally obsessed with." The evacuations at that site had been full of struggle. Quinn was glad he hadn't drawn *that* assignment. Not only had there

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been technical difficulties, but quite a lot of publicity, and political wrangling besides. McGuire's lawyers had been in and out of court for months because of it.

Eddie snatched up the manila envelope and swept Quinn and Scav Jack out with him to the van. Quinn felt a certain relief. Sometimes Eddie sent him with Dickie, who more or less acted as though Quinn were one of the robots. Even though Dickie demanded nothing (but passivity) from Quinn, something about Dickie's refusal of even the most minimal social relationship with him made Quinn feel . . . humiliated.

While Eddie drove, Quinn took the plans out of the envelope and looked over the layout of the six buildings to be evacuated. "Lots of ground floor units," he said. He glanced over his shoulder at Jack. "Should be plenty to keep you busy."

"I'll be doing the basements first, anyway, especially the laundry rooms," Jack said.

The buildings must be the right age for copper fittings. That must be the reason McGuire had Jack on this job from Go. He must be expecting a lot of pre-demolition loot.

As Eddie pulled up and parked behind the construction dumpster marked "McGuire Development, Inc.," a pair of women jogged past, on the opposite—west—side of the street. Quinn, looking at the muscular stringiness of their pale, sun block-gelled arms, calves and thighs, wondered why even reasonably fit women (and they had to be, if they were jogging on the streets of Capitol Hill) never looked as good as even the most ordinary characters in any VR simulation, much less cable and film stars. When the women you saw on the street weren't fat, they were flat and knotty and gnarly. Women couldn't always have been this ugly, he thought, or the species would have died out.

They spent the first hour casing out the site, deciding where to start. "You can see why the Chamber of Commerce is so eager to have these buildings cleared away," Eddie said. He shook his head. "These places should have been trashed ten or twenty years ago. It's a wonder the city didn't condemn them a long time ago."

"So it's not McGuire that's behind the offer to pay their way to that place in Arizona?" Quinn said.

Eddie snorted. "What does he care whether they go to shelters in Bellevue and Kirkland or out of state? It's all the same to *him*."

Still, McGuire didn't appreciate local publicity. And there was always the chance of that with evacuees who weren't sent out of state.

Though Quinn helped Dickie with the robots, the first pair of buses arrived well before they were ready to start. Quinn thought: *Not bad for a Monday morning.* But then, only a few minutes later, Eddie came over and said, "Don't do anything until I call McGuire. Take a look across the street. We've got company."

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Quinn turned away from the robot he'd been debarking and glanced across the street. Despite McGuire's assurances, there were about twenty-five Silent Witnesses, spaced several feet apart, processing up the block and then back down, passing one another on the sidewalk, as plodding and heavy and inevitable as the track on a bulldozer. They were wrapped, of course, in black robes and scarves from head to toe; even their air filters were black.

"The question," Eddie said, "is do they have any cameras. That's really all that matters. What do we care if they sweat themselves stupid under their shrouds and die of heat stroke. But about the camera thing—got to get some security over here, to take care of that possibility."

Cameras. Of course that was always what McGuire cared about, not the actual Silent Witnesses themselves. *They can describe all they want, and denounce the evacuations, but when it comes right down to it, unless they've got pictures, the media won't touch the story.* "Maybe if we just block their view, like with the placement of the buses and our own vehicles?"

Eddie shrugged. "Yeah, the way the buildings are set up, that'd probably work, especially with all the overgrown rhodies and laurels they let take over the whole fucking block. But I still got to call McGuire. He's gotta be told about this."

Quinn nodded. But he couldn't stop thinking about how he was a camera, and didn't know who the hell might be seeing what he was seeing, maybe even at that very second.

The building they chose to start with, a seedy, moss-blighted structure about sixty-five years old, had twenty small single-roomed efficiencies on the ground floor. (According to the specs, the ground floor had originally been a parking garage, presumably because of a building ordinance requiring off-street parking, but the owners at the time the city had been liberated from all zoning ordinances had converted the garage to living units.) When, flashlight in hand and a pair of robots in train, Quinn entered the pitch-black central hallway, though sweat was already soaking his hair and T-shirt, he was glad to be dressed in full-body armor and tech-enhanced helmet. (In the early days of his career, Quinn had realized that one had a better chance of winning evacuees' cooperation by showing them a human face, and so had never bothered with the body armor, and had worn a headset and glasses for technical enhancement. His practice changed, though, when he heard that an evacuation engineer in Houston had been shot in the face by a seventy-five-year-old woman who decided she wanted to "make a last stand.") There was something eerie and stifling about this ground floor. Thoughts of old people pressed against the doors lining this hall, handguns at the ready, spooked him. And though the helmet automatically filtered the air he breathed, he could swear he could smell sewage and urine and feces.

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Quinn stood before the cheap plywood door marked G-1 and consulted his heads-up display. "Callaghan, Sherri M.," was the name. He spoke into his headset and had it ring up the phone number listed.

"Hello?" a creaky old voice answered on the third ring.

Quinn drew a deep breath and launched into the spiel. "Sherri Callaghan? This is the evacuation engineer for McGuire Development Inc. According to our records, you received an eviction notice on March 1, giving you thirty days to vacate the premises. Ms. Callaghan, that time is up. We're going to have to remove you from the unit if you don't voluntarily agree to vacate yourself at once. Your staying is not only criminal trespass, but an illegal taking of the property of McGuire Development. . . . Ms. Callaghan, are you there?"

The creaky, cracking voice shrilled in his ear. "I've paid my rent on time every month since I moved into this place ten years ago. You have no reason to evict me. This is my home! This is where I *live*. And I tell you, I'm not ready for one of those shelters, either. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself, thank you."

"Ms. Callaghan, it's not a matter of paying the rent. The fact is, this building will be gone by next week. McGuire Development needs to tear it down along with quite a few others, so that it can make room for a golf course that will blend more naturally with the hill. And so I'm afraid you *are* going to have to leave, Ms. Callaghan, today."

"Fuck you, lackey!" the old voice said—and hung up.

Quinn sighed. It was to be expected, of course, because if she meant to go peacefully, the old bat would have been out of there already, especially once they shut off the water and power. God, those old hags were fighters. If all the evacuees were like her, the week was going to be hell.

Quinn ordered one of the robots forward and got it started battering the door. A single blow of its ram splintered the cheap old plywood, and in less than two minutes the robot had taken the door completely out. Quinn peered into the room, so dim and dingy. A scrawny old lady with a thousand wrinkles scoring her face and neck had taken a stand behind a much-patched vinyl recliner. In her fist quivered a triangular Sabatier knife. "Come any closer, and I'll kill myself!" she screamed at him. "I'm not going to any concentration camp! I worked my butt off, my whole life. I deserve to live out my old age in peace! I sure as *hell* didn't get to be this age just to be run out of my home by a human robot!"

Quinn blinked. They usually threatened him, not themselves. "Lady," he said. "I'm just doing my job. I'm an ordinary human being like anyone else. The fact is, you're in violation of the law. I have a writ from the King County Sheriff's Office—"

The old woman cut him off. "Nobody's ordinary anymore but us old people, who can remember what it was like when the world was run by human beings!" Her eyes, a pale watery blue, glittered with desperate rage.

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Her pasty pale cheeks, so wrinkled—and sprouted with long white hairs to boot—grew blotched, even as Quinn watched.

Quinn hated their scratchy, shrill voices; he hated the decrepitness of their skin; he hated the lumpiness of their posture. But he didn't want any of them dead on his account (and McGuire would be pissed as hell—at him, for having bungled), so he tongued the control that would seal off his air intake and said softly into his helmet's mike, "External speaker off; robot 2, tranquilize."

The odorless, scentless gas worked on the evacuee before she even realized it had been released. The knife clattered to the floor only a half-second before she crumpled into a heap beside it. Ms. Callaghan, barely conscious, was carried by robot 2 out to the bus destined for the Bellevue Shelter for the Elderly. The Silent Witnesses saw the transfer, but Quinn no longer cared. The woman had made him realize—as usually happened, once he got down to work—that inside the body armor and helmet, he wasn't really anybody in particular. And there was something about dealing with a knife-wielding crazy that made him feel that the sooner these people were put somewhere safe, the better.

"Hey Eddie," Quinn said when they were sitting in the back of the van sipping their Heinz Instant Lunch. "You have old people living with you, maybe that gives you some insight into them you can share with me. Like, what is it about them, that when they get an eviction notice, they like pretend it's not going to happen, because they think it *shouldn't,* because they think that just because they once worked for a living they somehow deserve to live happily ever after, like they're some fucking prince or princess in a fairy tale? I mean, with buildings like this one, where everybody's well over seventy, you have to fucking drag them out kicking and screaming. But then take an ordinary building with ordinary tenants, and when *they* get an eviction notice for whatever reason, they usually do the sensible thing, which is to make arrangements to live somewhere else. Even when that means moving to the suburbs where all the old geezers hang out, which is no cheery prospect by anybody's standards."

Eddie shook his head several times during Quinn's speech, and interpolated "I hear you, man," and "right about that" and other such demotics along the way. When Quinn finished, he said, giving Quinn the what-can-you-do hands-up-in-the-air gesture, "It's totally a difference in attitude and perspective, man. You got to understand, the old people, they think the world *owes* them. You know what I mean? They're all just pissed as hell that now that they got no chips to deal, the world isn't just giving them for free, say for just having kept themselves alive for so many years. While the truth is, the world don't give a shit about them, now that they got nothing to offer in any kind of meaningful deal. And if

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you think about where they're coming from, you can understand it. Like they were told over and over and over in the formative years of their lives all that stuff about the American Dream, about college and marriage and three kids and two vehicles and a house in the suburbs, while they don't know nothing about dealing, Quinn, it's all just this stuff of having paid their dues, as they call it, by having kids—which those of us who do it now have to fucking pay through the nose for the privilege—and by holding jobs which they seem to think makes them something special, instead of realizing that they were just damned lucky to be around when there *were* so many jobs, just for the taking, man, and vehicles and clean water and all that. But no. They got to feel resentful, because this isn't the twentieth century anymore and they're not God's Gift to the World. See, it's a twentieth-century kind of thing, Quinn. And all this refusing to accept eviction notices, that's just a symptom of their denial."

Eddie's analysis impressed the hell out of Quinn. On reflection, he supposed it was probably a good thing the old people had their attitude. He'd probably be out of a job if they didn't.

The afternoon dragged miserably. The power, needed to make evacuation of the upper stories at all possible, had not yet returned. Since it had become painfully clear that every evacuation would be a struggle of will and effort against what Quinn named (to Eddie) "elderly lunacy and recalcitrance," no one had any illusion that they'd finish the ground floor by quitting time. The temperature climbed into the mid-eighties, which made the body armor intolerable. And at around four, a thin mist appeared in the air, making it muggy rather than cool. Still, the Silent Witnesses persisted in their funereal marching. Quinn grew more and more irritable. It got so bad that he had a hard time restraining himself from shouting at the old people—or even hitting and kicking them. (He kept thinking that they deserved abuse, for so pointlessly making his life so miserable.)

He didn't believe things could get worse.

But at a little past four-thirty, Quinn got the fright of his life. He was in the long dark central hallway of the ground floor, giving his spiel over the phone. Suddenly, a round of gunfire shattered the silence, deafening him. Incredulous, he looked around—and saw, in the illumination from the headlight in his helmet, that the battering robot, standing in the hall only a few feet from him, had just had a good chunk of its body blown away. Because it was dark and because he had been occupied with giving the spiel, he had no idea where the assault had come from. (Later, he decided it must have been from the stairwell.) He only knew that he had to get the hell out of there before the next burst got *him*. Wanting to run (though his legs were violently shaking and weak), he instead dropped to his knees and crawled the entire length of the hall to the heavy, old-fash-

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ioned fire door leading to the tiny foyer. When he got to the door, he realized that the gunfire could, possibly, have come from behind it. (Or, he realized, from behind any of the doors of the units not yet evacuated. . . .)

"Quinn, what the hell's going on in there?" Eddie's voice came through the helmet's interior speaker. "Did I just hear gunfire? And if so, do you know anything about it?"

"Somebody just shot up robot number one!" Quinn said hoarsely. "Eddie, can you see into the foyer? Is it safe for me to exit through that door?"

"I'm *in* the foyer, Quinn."

Quinn hauled open the door and crawled out into the light. "Oh man, you'd better call the law," Quinn said, and noted that everything was shaking—his knees and legs, his belly, his voice. . . .

"Gotta call McGuire," Eddie said. "And let *him* decide whether to call the law."

Quinn gaped at him. They had some maniac running around this building with a shotgun, and Eddie wasn't sure they should call the cops?

Dickie, who'd probably been busy with solitaire in the back of his truck, charged in. "My robots! I've got to get my robots!"

Eddie grabbed Dickie. "Hey, man, cool it. The robots can wait. You don't want to get yourself killed, do you?"

As Eddie had guessed, McGuire absolutely vetoed calling the cops. If the cops came, the media people would come. And the last thing McGuire wanted was the media's attention on the evacuations of Summit Avenue East. "So what the fuck are we supposed to do?" Quinn said angrily. They had taken shelter in the back of the van, fearful that the person with the shotgun might decide to play sniper from an upper story.

"He's sending a couple of security guards over," Eddie said. "He said that if we're careful, this nut with the gun shouldn't be any problem."

"Hell, Eddie, these old people, they're crazy about guns! For all we know, the guy who shot up the robots is only one of a whole gang that's decided to make a fucking bloody last stand, like in one of those old movies!"

Eddie nodded thoughtfully. "Could be. But McGuire's line is that it's just some old gaga singleton. All we got to do is find the guy, and we're safe."

Quinn laughed incredulously. "Right. Well, I tell you what, Eddie. Mr. McGuire's security guards can do that. I don't got no deal covering high hazard situations. Mr. McGuire don't pay me for that. And I'm not trained in security techniques, you know?"

Though he made a sympathetic face, Eddie shook his head. "I know it looks bad, Quinn. But consider this: if you let Mr. McGuire down, even though on some theoretical ground you may be right, the fact is—and remember, I know him a whole hell of a lot better than you—the true god-honest fact of the matter is he'll just hire the next person on the list of people wanting to work for him."

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Quinn knew Eddie was right. McGuire had the advantage in their deal. And whoever had a big advantage, generally called the tune. That was life.

Quinn rode the Number 14 bus downtown in such a zoned-out, numb daze that only the sight of a bookstore reminded him that he had to pick up a copy of the Chekhov story. So though a bus to Wallingford pulled in just as he got off the Number 14, he walked away from it and went into the little shop on Fourth Avenue he usually patronized.

Quinn was feeling bad. Quinn was feeling guilty. Quinn was feeling angry. Quinn needed to forget the remark he'd made to Eddie at around 5:30, he needed to forget the look Eddie had given him when he'd made it. *You know, Eddie, it would serve them right if we just told these jerks we're burning the buildings to the ground whether they leave or not, and then just do it.*

Since Chekhov wasn't a big seller, the bookstore had to download the publisher's DVI file and print a copy of *Three Years*. Quinn browsed through the fast-sellers while he waited. But he flinched when he saw, in the Number Six spot on the rack, *How to Manage a Comfortable Old Age on a Shrinking Pension*. Of course. The biggest market for books was in the over-sixty category. *No wonder they think it's their world. No wonder they think they're so fucking important.* Quinn told himself he'd better not talk for even a second to Courtney. She was always going on about "the old dears," and would be shocked at his anger at not only the people he was evacuating, but at the elderly as a whole. Bad enough the way she was always saying she didn't understand the "meanness and selfishness" of "people these days." Bad enough that she (gently) disapproved of his job. He doubted he could keep his mouth shut for even a minute tonight.

She'd probably sympathize with the nut with the shotgun!

But Quinn knew: it was better to think about all that than to think about how McGuire would fire him if he didn't continue with the evacuations on schedule.

Quinn sacrificed three of his sitcom faves that evening to read *Three Years*, but even so didn't get far. It helped that a description of his character, Nina, and her childhood, came early in the story, but it was so crammed full of background and descriptions that Quinn kept nodding off. The story, he knew, would make a good multi-user fiction precisely because of all that background—there'd be all sorts of "insets" and flashbacks embedded in the main narrative stream—but it was hard-going, trying to read. He hadn't thought Chekhov would be so *difficult*. It was the Russian name of the author, more than anything, that had drawn him to sign up for it. Every time he reserved a role in a new fiction, he thought of the first fiction he'd been in—six months' worth of Satur-

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days—*War and Peace.* It had virtually taken over his existence for that entire half year, and had left him bereft and empty when it had finally ended. He'd played only a minor role, the Princess Marya, wife of Prince Andrei, but he'd been on hand for all of it, his presence blocked out in scenes in which his character did not appear. For six months he had been caught up in a vast network of relationships, richer than anything he had ever known. The characters had been so fully real to him that the people around him—Courtney and Eddie, for instance—seemed flat caricatures of human beings. And the settings in those Russian novels! So exotic and elaborate and beautiful . . . it was as though one actually were a Russian aristocrat!

Nothing, Quinn suspected, would ever match up to *War and Peace.* And yet, he hoped . . .

Finally, Quinn gave up his effort to read, and decided that he'd have his KMIX program wake him an hour early, so he could do some reading then. At registration the moderator had stressed that it was essential participants read the story at least once beforehand.

Though the stresses and irritations of the day had totally wiped him out, instead of dropping quickly into sleep, Quinn hovered for a long time in an unpleasant hypnagogic twilight. Images of gnarled old hands clutching canes and knives and shotguns pressed redly against his eyelids. When he did sleep, he dreamed that he got up out of bed and took a Night Owl bus over to the site, where he set fires in the basement of every building scheduled for evacuation. Then, instead of getting the hell away from there, he crouched behind a laurel bush on the opposite side of the street, and watched the flames spread upward, and old people come creeping out, dragging themselves step by step with their walkers and canes and crutches. When the first fire trucks arrived, his grandmother was suddenly there, pointing (with a cane!) at the laurel shielding Quinn. "The drone who did this is there, hiding like the coward he is. Drone, drone, you'd murder your own grandmother for a VR session!"

Quinn woke in a sweat, and wished he had some Valium. *Like being in a fucking horror movie, man.* It was only midnight. He groped through the orange crate he kept his underwear in and found the card of sleeping dots that he'd been hoarding for just this kind of night. He stuck one on his neck, then lay back down and closed his eyes. Dots left you feeling like shit the entire day after, but they worked fast.

When Quinn arrived at the site in the morning he found not only McGuire there, but a group of spooky-looking men McGuire referred to as his "own private SWAT team." They all looked like marines—young, scalped, dressed in fatigues and weighted down with a variety of weapons and communication gear. Quinn whispered to Eddie, "Pretty damned scary, man." The sight of these commandos gave him misgivings,

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sure. How could blood not be spilled, with these guys running amok? And yet, he was glad he wasn't going to be expected to handle the situation all by himself. That feeling in his head, he thought, that was the hangover from the sleeping dot. The sense of unreality, like everything, was totally random. But that other thing, overlaying it, was that spanking feeling, that he got in his face (which could, he thought, also be the sleeping dot), the feeling of crying (even though he wasn't), of angry parents and punishment, a really really *empty* feeling. . . .

"What we're going to do, see," McGuire said to Quinn, Eddie, and Dickie; "is we're going to call all the rest of the people in that building and give them the spiel, and warn them in clear, stark terms that if they don't get their asses out now, while they have the chance, things could get ugly, because of that joker with the shotgun." McGuire pointed to each of them in turn. "Now I want all three of you to get on the phones and just do them all, bing bing bing."

Dickie of course protested—he wasn't hired to "deal with the public," he was just a "robot man," but McGuire wasn't impressed, and since Dickie was already pretty upset about losing one of his "boys" to the shotgun, he capitulated without much of a struggle.

While they were inside the van doing the phoning, the commandos got themselves "in position," as McGuire called it. Quinn was on his third call when he heard McGuire's voice swearing in three different languages loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear. So Quinn wasn't surprised when McGuire stuck his head through the driver's window and said, "The fucking Silents are here, and they've got a fucking media team with them!"

Quinn's gaze met Eddie's. Cameras. The Silent Witnesses must have parlayed the sound of gunfire into some media interest. Quinn whispered to Eddie, "We should of laid off for a day or two, and waited until the media decided that the Silents had made it all up." It wasn't as though they didn't have other sites they could be working on.

"Mr. McGuire," Eddie said respectfully. McGuire had already turned away from the window, but at Eddie's words came back. "I earnestly recommend that you not have the boys get rough with the media. It'd only get them really interested, and then we'd never have them off our backs."

"Yeah, yeah. And the prudent thing to do would be to back off, let things cool down," McGuire said. (Quinn sighed with relief.) "But hell, if I do that, these people will *really* dig in, especially the ones in the other five buildings, thinking they can buffalo us with a little gunfire. So I guess I'm not going to call the boys off." He nodded at them. "Keep on with the phoning, and when you're done, get into your heavy armor. We're going to fucking storm the dump."

Quinn gulped water, and gabbled the spiel to anyone who didn't hang up as soon as he said he was from McGuire Development Inc. Somebody

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could get killed, he thought. It was that kind of unreal situation. And it could be anybody, the evacuees, the commandos—even him.

Quinn had never liked guns, not even in VR scenarios. Murder mysteries were okay, since they always ended up solved and with the violence under control. And the cannon had been okay in *War and Peace,* a controlled, aesthetic image of war, not an acting out of violence.

But this situation, this "war," was fucking out of control, man.

When everything was "set," one of the commando-types took up a bullhorn and announced in an all-but-official police style that the evacuees had one last chance to come out before force was used to "secure" the building. Scav Jack wandered up (late clocking in, as usual) and looked with bemusement at Quinn, Dickie, and Eddie, all in heavy armor. "So they're really going to do it, hunh," he said.

Quinn was watching the foyer, but Eddie elbowed him and said, "Look up there, on the fourth floor. Think it washes?" A broom handle had been thrust out the window; white underwear dangled from the end.

"Oh, hey," Dickie said, "they're coming out."

Quinn looked back at the foyer. Sure enough, a woman with cropped gray hair was staggering out the door, dragging three suitcases and a big translucent trash bag through which Quinn could see photo albums, computer disks, and an accordion-fold ergonomic keyboard. (A cellular phone had been crammed into one jacket pocket, and a cat could be seen peeping out of the other.) She looked in pretty good shape, for an old person, Quinn thought. (Her taste in dress, though, he judged dreadful: she wore blue jeans, an ancient, patched tweed jacket and a knee-length faded black turtleneck shirt, which hung about five inches below the hem of the jacket. And she had on Adidas shoes, which since the company had been subsumed in 2020 by Le AeroDynamique, must be at least seventeen years old.) When she cleared the threshold, she stopped, and stared first at the group in body armor by the van, and then at the commandos. "There are more coming behind me," she called out in a strong, powerful voice, "but they're slow. And there are three people in wheel chairs on the third and fourth floors who can't get down because you people have shut off the electricity."

"And your name is?" McGuire said (gesturing behind his back at Eddie).

The woman glared at McGuire. "Goldmark. Myra Goldmark. And I'll tell you this, you would have had more people leave of their own accord yesterday if you hadn't turned the power off."

"You know who shot up our robot, and almost killed our evacuation engineer, Ms. Goldmark?" McGuire said.

Goldmark's pale thin lips pressed tightly together; Quinn had the impression she was struggling to suppress a smile (or laugh). "No idea. No

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idea at all. But there is one thing I am going to tell you. I've been living in this building since 1990. Which means I've shelled out in excess of $188,000 in rent, cumulatively, to live here. So I think it's the fucking limit of cheek for you to tell me about 'taking,' mister."

As Goldmark spoke, another old person appeared in the foyer, moving slowly, slowly, so very, very slowly, seriously hunched over, dragging himself along by a walker to which had been tied a variety of possessions. McGuire turned around and grinned at Eddie. "Looks like there's not going to be a show, after all. It's unconditional surrender, as far as I can see. We'll send the boys in when everyone's come out who's willing and able, and then have them check out the building and get those wheelchair people down." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Media won't stick around for all that. No hot action, no interest. The Silents are out of luck—again."

Whoever had fired the gun had apparently shot his or her wad. The evacuation went smoothly, and put McGuire in such a good mood that he ordered Quinn to help some of the evacuees get second loads of their possessions to take on the bus with them. Later, when Scav Jack was combing through the units for materials that could be sold, he found a cache of firearms, which he itemized for Eddie and Quinn as "An Uzi, one M16, two Colt .45s, one Beretta, and four hand grenades." It was the Uzi, he said, that had destroyed the robot.

Quinn hated the Chekhov. It might have a simple theme—wealthy man falls in love with poor, beautiful young woman trapped in her father's house, marries her though she doesn't love him, then falls out of love with her while she falls in love with him—but Quinn never felt he understood what was going on. The other players clearly did. About halfway through the fiction, he realized he had made a mistake. (Playing a thin fragile woman dying of cancer, dressed in beautiful negligees, never quite made up for the disappointment.) And though usually—filled with intense, beautiful images from the fiction—he had the pleasure of masturbating Saturday night and intermittently throughout Sunday, he only beat off once from this fiction, and that desultorily on Saturday night, by separating the physical image of Julia from the character. After the unpleasantness and anxiety of a bad, bad week, he felt almost bitter about the disappointment, as though he'd been misled.

He did have one gratified thought, though: the person who'd put the chip in his head would be getting even less out of it than he had. But while that thought gave him a certain sense of grim satisfaction, another thought followed, that (briefly) disturbed him: Why would anyone choose to look out through another—very ordinary—person's eyes when if you're that wealthy to begin with you could spend every waking hour doing VR?

Quinn registered for another fiction he was sure he'd like (he'd played

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in a fragment of the same piece a few years back)—one that would last for months. Anthony Trollope's Palliser series had many, many characters, and not only was fairly easy reading, but had been done years back on video. It might not be as wonderful as *War and Peace*—but then again, it might be even better! The role he had signed up for was Dolly Longstaff, a rather steady presence throughout the novels. (Quinn found the male costumes so rich and elegant that in this case he was quite happy to take a male role.)

The very first Saturday they started the Trollope fiction Quinn received his gene therapy treatment. Knowing that he'd soon be freed from the insulin patches, Quinn decided he really didn't mind having the chip in his brain, after all. If anyone had known—Eddie, McGuire, or Courtney—it would have been a different story. But though it occasionally made him feel like he was in a movie, or an invisible witness of VR scenes in which he wasn't playing, mostly he forgot it was even there. Life wasn't great, but submersion in Trollope rendered everything else mere trivial interruption.

So Quinn's life was again okay, yeah. But a couple of months later, it slid into a real nightmare. He came home one night, tired, irritable, ready for a few hours of Trollope video. (He'd all but given up his fave sitcoms, which simply couldn't compete with obsession.) When Courtney appeared while he was nuking some soup and bread in the kitchen, he assumed it was to exchange the usual civilities. But after greeting him, she said—looking terribly grave—that she needed to talk seriously with him after he'd eaten. And then she disappeared back into her part of the house.

Quinn could hardly eat. All he could think was that she had somehow found out about the chip in his head. He couldn't think of any other thing he might have done to make her look at him like that. He hadn't let garbage accumulate in his room since the first month he'd lived in her house. He wiped his piss off the toilet twice a week. And he always remembered to clean the lint filter on the dryer. Had he somehow slipped without realizing it?

He knocked on the living-room door and went in. Courtney was curled up in one of her large overstuffed chairs so old the velvet was worn to the nap in many places. She smiled briefly at him, put aside her book, and invited him to sit. The old leather couch was so lumpy Quinn didn't really enjoy occupying it, but it was the only thing that would position him properly for a chat. "I guess I must have somehow screwed up, for you to be looking like that," he said.

Courtney's lips tightened in obvious annoyance. "No, of course not. It's not that at all," she said. She sighed. "It's just that . . . well, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to pay more per month. I don't see any way out of it."

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Quinn felt sick. He knew she charged him barely enough to cover his share of the utilities, services, and insurance, much less food. But he really couldn't afford more than he was paying already.

When Quinn didn't say anything, Courtney went on, "The Wallingford Security Association has raised its rates. I need to come up with another thousand a year for them." She shrugged. "Well, it's not a negotiable fee. You know how risky it is not to subscribe to their services."

Yeah. Quinn knew. You lost the sign saying you were under their protection, and everyone knew that if they broke into your place, nobody'd stop them from doing it, even if somebody saw it happen, or saw someone actually carrying off your stuff. And there'd be nobody to come to your rescue if you were home during a break-in, or had another security emergency. . . .

"A thousand," Quinn said bleakly. A thousand a year would mean he'd have to give up his VR sessions, cable, his lattes, and lunch! He couldn't do it!

"I'm sorry," Courtney said. "I've been balancing pretty carefully, so I don't really have a margin for the extra expense."

And if Quinn couldn't pay it, she'd get somebody else who could. "Yeah, you've been giving me a really generous deal, and you know I appreciate that, Court," Quinn said.

Courtney looked embarrassed. Of course most people would say that the deal she gave him was stupid, was in fact charity, which in a certain sense it was. She hadn't had a boarder before him, but when she'd run into him in the old neighborhood, when she was visiting her parents, who lived next door to his, her old baby-sitter's heart had kicked in when she'd learned he was living in a tent in his parents' backyard, and she'd just swept him up and taken care of him, as if he were still ten years old instead of twenty-six. He'd always supposed it was because she felt that inheriting the house from her aunt was a windfall, especially when her family was so pissed at her for her politics (as well as for selling her ovaries—and the eggs inside them—to pay for a full college education).

It was a blow, all right. And though it wasn't her problem, Courtney said that if he couldn't manage it she'd help him find a new place—a room on Beacon Hill, probably—with the latest data Plymouth had for doing their referrals. Quinn said he'd think about it, and talk to his boss, see if he couldn't get a raise (something he had no intention of doing, since it would be just like McGuire to fire him for even asking).

Since childhood, Quinn had thought of himself as unlucky. For that reason, Quinn felt totally unsurprised and fatalistic when McGuire arrived on the site the next morning and pulled Quinn aside to talk to him. *I'm getting canned. I just know it. What other reason would he have for coming out here specially to talk to me? It sure isn't to tell me what a fine*

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job I've been doing and how he appreciates me so much he's going to give me a raise.

"I'll come straight to the point, Quinn," McGuire said brusquely. "Let me say first of all that this is no reflection on your work, which has been competent and conscientious, if, shall we say, uninspired."

Uninspired? What the fucking hell does that mean?

McGuire gave Quinn a hard, man-to-man look. "The fact is, since Winn Construction won that suit, the going price of evacuation engineers has been plummeting." Quinn had only the vaguest notion of what McGuire was talking about. Could that be the case in which the relatives of some people holding out past their eviction notices sued some company for blowing up the building while their relatives were still in it? McGuire jerked his bristly chin at Quinn. "Another fact is that my overheads recently shot up. Not only did I have to replace that robot that got killed by that sniper on Summit Avenue East, but I've decided to bite the bullet and purchase a crane. Mostly because I'm sick to death of paying an arm and a leg to lease the fuckers. So. What that adds up to, kid, is that I'm going to have to cut your pay by about a hundred bucks a month. Sorry."

Quinn knew when he was beaten. He watched McGuire walk away without uttering one word of argument. If it were true that some people were dispensing with evacuation engineers altogether, any trouble from him and McGuire might decide to do the same.

What a disaster! Without any warning whatsoever, L. Quinn had arrived at one of those points in an individual's life that demands serious thinking. Though he had so far managed to escape taking his own decisions too seriously, when his very ability to "get by" was threatened, he knew he had reached bedrock. The biggest decision of his life—giving up his fertility for some college—hadn't taken him much thought at all, since he'd known that without college the possibility of raising a child wasn't viable, and that since the US military had refused him, there was no other way to get any college. And once having made the decision, he simply hadn't thought about it again.

He did some calculating. And he realized that even if his parents would be willing to have him sleeping in their backyard in a tent again, the numbers didn't add up. The commute from Kirkland was simply too expensive (not to mention time-consuming), and with the new cut to his pay was out of the question (even if he gave up his KMIX program and cable and Internet subscriptions). (Giving up his Saturday VR sessions was unthinkable; they were all that made life tolerable.) He also knew that because Courtney gave him such a great deal, moving elsewhere wouldn't just mean moving into a place less comfortable; no, it would probably mean moving into a place where you'd always be having to watch your back, where your room would be broken into while you were out at work

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every few days or so, and where the insects and rodents ruled supreme. For impoverished loners like him, without buddies he could join forces and pool resources with, the alternatives were bleak.

He had a good deal with Courtney. A *really* good deal. He'd probably never made a better deal in his life. What he had to do was to preserve that deal. To do that, he needed to make another deal . . . with someone else. Another deal that would compensate him for his losses. Which meant that all he had to do—the only thinking that he considered was really required of him—was to develop that deal. There are always deals waiting to be made. Now that his genes were fixed, he had a whole, sound body (minus viable gametes). That was the most obvious area for deal-making. All he had to do was decide what—if anything—he could afford (and stand) to give up. . . .

Quinn had done bone marrow donations in the past to get himself through tight times. (The first time he had done it to pay for on-line library services required for his courses.) Though he knew well it was painful, it paid better than all but the most drastic sorts of donations. The main catch—besides the pain—was that a) he'd have to take time off from work (and the fact was, McGuire had a tendency to fire people who got sick); and b) it might take a while, once his name was put on the register, to get matched. There were other sorts of clinical-type possibilities, but he didn't really like any of them. Drug trials—which usually involved contracting a horrible disease—he ruled out from the top. Physical experiments could involve artificial task-prosthetics as well as neurological tinkering: both tended to change your body and your life, and the latter your mind as well. Similarly, psychological experiments tended to be highly invasive (especially since one generally had to be implanted with spy chips), and their terms largely kept a secret from their subjects.

Bone marrow donations had no lasting effects. . . .

Quinn had nearly made his decision—having done almost no thinking at all—when he had a brainstorm. Of course, he thought. It was obvious. And it would be absolutely painless and cost him very little trouble at all. What he liked best about it, though, was that it showed he *deserved* to survive, that he was indeed exceptionally shrewd and clever.

Quinn implemented his plan with little trouble. First he bought an eyepatch, and then he started wearing it. One day he wore it over his right eye, the next day he wore it over his left. Though the patch was an inconvenience and irritation and forced him to be more cautious in trusting his depth perception, it didn't really impede his vision to any practical degree. He told everyone who asked he was doing it on a bet. He didn't wear it to McGuire's offices on Monday mornings, of course, but he wore it almost all the rest of the time.

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After two days of wearing the patch over alternating eyes, Quinn made a large sign which he propped against the wall opposite his mattress. He also printed the words of the sign on a scrap of paper he kept in his pocket and often pulled out to stare at. And then, after a week of wearing the patch, Quinn decided to wear it always over the right eye, except when doing VR sessions—or when staring at the poster or the paper he kept in his pocket.

In the meantime, he assured Courtney she could count on his being able to come up with the extra cash. He didn't tell her, but he muttered a dozen times a day to himself, "My ship's coming in, my ship's coming in, any day now my ship's coming in." He didn't know the source or context of that phrase, but like most VR fiction addicts, he thought that picking up such useful tags just proved that such fictions weren't at all "trashy," as certain types of people liked to claim.

Three weeks and two days after Quinn began wearing the patch, the "patron" who was using Quinn as a camera phoned him. Since the evening Quinn had agreed to the deal, he had pictured the "patron" as a rich old white guy, bored with VR, bored with cable, bored with the finest amenities of life, contracting for cheap thrills with a variety of individuals able to present him with samples of life totally different from his own. But when the call came, and the face on the monitor stared out at him, he didn't at first take in that *this* was the patron he had to deal with. The patron was not male; the patron was not old; the patron was not white; and the patron, though clearly at least affluent, was probably not fabulously wealthy. (Though you never could tell.) And of course—as he had expected—the patron was not pleased to be speaking with him. "So," she said, her voice as frosty as her eyes, "you said you wanted to talk to me. So talk."

Quinn swallowed, and glanced away from the screen. He had fantasized this conversation dozens of times. But he couldn't remember his opening lines! He said, "Well, uh," and stopped to clear his throat. He sat up straighter and tried to make his face and voice aggressive (asking himself, silently: *Who does this woman think she is, anyway?*). "Are you the person who made the deal to get that chip put in my head?"

The woman crossed her arms over her chest. (Her shirt was quite elegant: an olive silk with plain white collar and cuffs. Quinn just loved fine clothes. No one he knew personally—except in VR—ever wore them.) "Yes. Is there a problem? If so, you should call the number of the neurological specialist that should have been given to you at the time of the implant."

Quinn wondered if maybe she was somebody's assistant. That would explain it. The assistant of some rich old geezer, who wouldn't bother dealing with this kind of nuisance himself. . . . He said, "No, it's not that.

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I've got another kind of problem, which you don't really need to know about. But it's a problem that's going to lose me my housing arrangements, and maybe even my job." (That was stretching it, of course, though if he had to move too far away, he wouldn't be able to afford to keep working for McGuire, and if he did bone marrow donations, he'd likely be fired.) Quinn grinned for the camera. "Unless I get some help, that is."

"It would certainly be unfortunate if you lost your job," the woman said. "But I don't understand what that has to do with your blocking your eyesight."

Quinn drew a deep breath, and let loose with it. "What it has to do with, is though it's a pain in the butt to be wearing a patch like that, I can do it, see, and get by, if I have to. Now when I made that deal with you, or with whoever you represent, I made the deal to get the chip implanted. There wasn't any deal about my having to use that eye, or anything like that."

The woman's expression was so constant that Quinn felt as though he were talking to a robot. "Ah. So you want to make *another* deal, a deal in which you agree not to obstruct your own vision."

"Yeah. Exactly."

"Well? What terms are you asking?"

Quinn licked his lips. He absolutely had to have a minimum of a thousand a year. But, on the other hand, he knew it was all too possible that whoever was using him for a camera might get tired of his pictures after just a few months. (People's lives, he knew—his own, at least—were, in the raw, just plain dull.) "Five thousand, flat one-time fee," Quinn said hoarsely. "That's what I gotta have."

The woman continued to stare at him. Quinn fully expected her to bargain him down, and prepared himself for a battle. (He absolutely, positively, would not agree to anything less than three thousand, he told himself.) After a few seconds, though, she agreed to his terms—but said she wanted him to sign a contract assuring her that he wouldn't default on his side of the deal. She said she'd call back in an hour with the name of a notary to whom she would fax a copy of the contract. On signing, the money would be transferred to his bank account electronically.

Quinn was ecstatic. He'd never made a better deal in his life.

After work the next day, Quinn went to the designated notary, conveniently located three blocks from his transfer point. Quinn read the brief text of the contract and signed it. The notary completed the electronic transfer which had been initiated by the other party, and gave him a signed and countersigned copy of the contract as well as a receipt for the transfer. Easy-peasy, Quinn thought happily. Five thousand dollars, imagine that!

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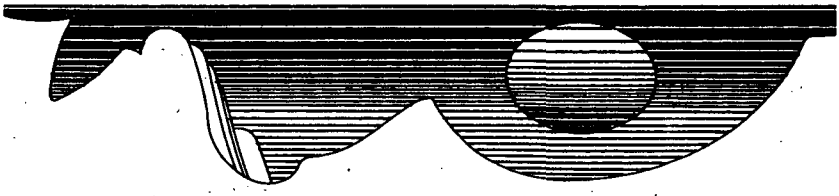
When he boarded the bus to Wallingford, he was lucky enough to get a seat straight off. He unfolded the receipt to look again at its nice round figure. And then he unfolded the contract and reread its text. Such a deal! Suddenly curious, and thinking he might learn something, he looked at the name of the person who had countersigned. Jacquelyn S. James, Ph.D., for the Gutwirth Institute of Social Research.

Quinn's pleasure wavered. Something wasn't right! What the fuck was the Gutwirth Institute of Social Research?

When Quinn got home he brushed past Courtney's greeting (and interest in his having shed the eyepatch) and logged onto his Internet account. First he did a search for the Gutwirth Institute of Social Research. *Denver, Colorado. Specializes in documenting current social conditions and collecting oral histories, primarily from the indigent and the aged. Associates tend to be historians, documentary film makers, political scientists, and philosophers specializing in ethical issues.* Quinn felt sick. What had he gotten himself involved with? He skimmed over the data tree, and clicked on Associates. He ran down the list of names until he came to James's, and clicked on it. *Born, Jan 9, 2007, New York, NY. BA in history, Cornell University, 2025. MA in film arts, UCLA, 2027. Ph.D. in Political Science, Harvard University, 2030. Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of Chicago, 2030-2034. Associate of the Gutwirth Institute, 2034—. Current project: Compiling an archive of documentary evidence of systematic depopulation and demographically determined holocaust, for evaluation and use in the future, after the restoration to society at large of a general sense of moral sanity.*

Quinn logged off and prepared for a solid evening spent watching Trollope videos. If he understood the import of what he had found on the Internet—and perhaps we should assume he had only an inkling—no doubt he did not care to think about it. He dismissed his patron, Jacquelyn S. James, as an ideologue, a whiner, or an extremist—using him for her own twisted, nihilist ends. It didn't matter, he assured himself. He had *solved* his problem, he had proven he had what it took to create and make a deal on his own terms. All that mattered was that McGuire never find out that he, Quinn, had a Silent Witness implanted in his head, endlessly transmitting all that Quinn's eye beheld. All that really mattered was that he had made a deal favorable to himself. He knew his priorities.

For he was, L. Quinn, a true child of his age. ●



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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

Sex, Lies, and Monsters

Chris Bell is a British writer and musician resident in Germany, whose current book is published by a New Zealand firm. You might expect such a cosmopolitan résumé to be reflected in his stories, and you would not be disappointed. In *The Bumper Book of Lies* (MψtψMψn, trade, 251 pages, available for $18.00, which includes S&H, through agent Graham Evans, 1 Nichols Court, Belle Vue, Chelmsford, Essex, CM2 0BS, England), the reader will encounter supernatural events among modern Maori ("This Shining World"); surreal Nashville bars ("Multi-Bob"); Jamaican obeah resistance to exploiters ("Dream Me an Island"); and haunted Hamburg cemeteries ("The Cruel Countess")—just to name a few. Exhibiting a tremendous facility with style and form, Bell can produce everything from vigorously plotted cyberpunk narratives ("'Skins Out!'") to whimsical daydreams ("On Formosa Street" and "Nude Disintegrating Parachutist Woman"). Powered by his torrid love affair with fantastic literature and pop music, Bell's stories fully succeed in their stated intention of being "incantation[s] to summon an atmosphere, in the way the best songs and most potent perfumes can do." Highly recommended.

If you locked Poe, Shirley Jackson, and Ian McEwan in a niter-encrusted basement, fed them a ghoul's diet and siphoned off their commingled blood for injections, you might derive a sensory high similar to that delivered by Doug Rice's *Blood of Mugwump* (FC2, trade, $8.95, 140 pages). In this fantasia, Rice explores the subconscious human mysteries of sex, gender, and birth through the tale of the polymorphous Mugwump family (whose runty, helpless scion is named Doug Rice!). From womb to tomb, Ur-daughter Caddie (any resemblance to Faulkner's famous Caddie is strictly intentional) molds and twists her brother Doug through one ghastly metamorphosis after another, all the while raising issues of identity and biological destiny that affect us all. This could very well be *Dandelion Wine* (1957) as rewritten by Lafferty and Baudelaire.

Visionaries Revisited

It does my heart good to run across old friends in new clothes. So I am very happy to report on the following reprints.

Editor Jacob Weisman has done a splendid job of assembling a fresh mix of stories by Clifford Simak.

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Over the River and Through the Woods (Tachyon Publications, hardcover, $25.00, 218 pages) emphasizes Simak's bucolic side (only "Construction Shack" ventures completely off Earth). But since every story is a winner and never totally like its cousins, the effect is both unified and sufficently varied. Although I have been reading Simak for three decades, I encountered stories here which I could swear I had never seen before ("Dusty Zebra" and "Neighbor"), along with old favorites such as "The Big Front Yard." If you've never experienced the wonders Simak could fashion with the simplest of sentences and the most humble of philosophies, then you owe it to yourself to start now.

If, like me, you read and enjoyed Samuel Delany's postmodern fantasy series set in the protohistorical land of Nevèrÿon piecemeal over nearly the past two decades, you will be very happy to have the four volumes available again in an elegant uniform edition from Wesleyan University Press. In the official new sequence, they are: *Tales of Nevèrÿon* (trade, $12.95, 260 pages); *Neveryóna* (trade, $14.95, 399 pages); *Flight from Nevèrÿon* (trade $14.95, 376 pages); and *Return to Nevèrÿon* (trade $14.95, 291 pages). Here you will find a glamorous bricolage of semiotic sword-and-sorcery, containing not only some of Delany's most vivid prose, but also his densest. As the Worm of Time bites its own tail, the far past of Nevèrÿon intersects our own present, offering fascinating juxtapositions.

Once I heard Lucius Shepard opine that after his failure as a rock musician, there was nowhere lower on the economic and status scale to go than SF writer. It was only natural for me to be reminded of this self-denigrating, yet somehow tragically noble remark by the appearance of two must-have books from Stephen Brown's new small press, Eyeball Books (P.O. Box 18539, Asheville, NC 28814). Brown has started what should, in the best of all worlds, turn into a John Shirley rediscovery by reissuing Shirley's 1980 novel *City Come A-Walkin'* (trade, $10.00, 216 pages) and by compiling a new Shirley story collection, *The Exploded Heart* (trade, $10.00, 309 pages). The seventeen-year-old novel retains its immediacy, reading like the script for the next John Woo movie, and highlights the ambiguous feelings for technology always festering at the heart of cyberpunk. The latter volume contains exceedingly frank and valuable autobiographical insights into Shirley's frenetic life, as well as plenty of the turbocharged fiction that crawled down Shirley's frazzled neurons over two decades. In addition, each of these handsomely crafted objects boasts an arresting cover by the kaliedoscope-eyed Rick Berry, and an affectionate introduction from, respectively, William Gibson and Bruce Sterling.

Any book that goes seventy years between editions almost qualifies as a new work, although there will always be a tendency to

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view such a volume as an antique curiosity. When the unearthed prose reads as fresh and enthralling as if written yesterday, however, a real miracle is at hand. It is my pleasure to report that Old Earth Books (P.O. Box 19951, Baltimore, MD 21211), under the guiding hand of the sagacious Michael Walsh, has wrought such a miracle with *The Marvellous Land of Snergs* (trade, $20.00, which includes S&H, 220 pages), by E. A. Wyke-Smith. As with Kenneth Morris, the rediscovery of Wyke-Smith gifts us modern readers with quality fantasy from the mythical Time Before Tolkien (who himself admired *Snergs*). *Snergs* is a comic adventure much in the manner of E. Nesbit, Baum, and the Milne of *Once on a Time* (1917). In a land removed from ours by twisty paths, a colony of rescued abandoned children exists side by side with the crew of the *Flying Dutchman* and the hobbit-like Snergs, among other fey beings. When two of the children wander away from their safe enclave, the reader finds himself on an adventure where every fairy-tale trope is simultaneously fulfilled and wittily subverted. Wyke-Smith's hilarious portrait of a vegetarian ogre is worth the price of admission alone. This book is an example of small press publishing at its most valuable, and deserves your support.

Blithe Demises

Batty. Addled. Delightful. Cock-eyed. Wise. I'm fairly certain these are some of the adjectives I'm searching for to describe Joan Aiken's *The Cockatrice Boys* (Tor, hardcover, $20.95, 221 pages), but I can't be sure, since my grey cells are still reeling from this book's Edward Lear-like sensible nonsense. Aiken's tale reads like Hodgson's *The Night Land* (1912) as rewritten by Lewis Carroll.

The Cockatrice Boys is billed as Aiken's first novel for adults, as if adults haven't all along been reading such YA fantasies of hers as *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* (1962). And while adults of a whimsical cast will fall into this book gleefully, there's nothing here, ad copy aside, to stop you from also thrusting it into the hands of any intelligent young reader. You would be doing them an immense favor.

Aiken opens her book with a fabulistic assurance and celerity that will continue throughout. Within the first ten pages the British Isles have been subjected to a supernatural invasion of garish monsters, known generically as cockatrices; the island's population has been decimated and reduced to living as hungry refugees in ruins over the course of a decade; and the remnants of the government, under Prime Minister Lord Ealing (note the name's connection to that famous series of British comedies), has formed the Cockatrice Boys, a last-ditch corps of volunteers who shall emerge from hiding in their retrofitted war-train, *The Cockatrice Belle,* to save the land.

Whew! Now the real story be-

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gins. Alternately inhabiting the viewpoints of two youngsters, cousins Sauna Blow and Dakin Prestwich, we follow the *Cockatrice Belle* on its path across ravaged England, heading toward the probable HQ of the monsters in Scotland. Along the way, we shall encounter heroism, treachery, hope and despair—as well as plenty of blackberry tea and parsley sandwiches.

Aiken's prose is supple, deadpan and elegantly skewed. Her Trolls exhibit "dynamic powers of self-transportation." A woeful soldier is given "an arrowroot jujube which he sucked in tearful and hiccuping silence." Dialogue between her goofily named characters (Major Scanty, Colonel Clipspeak, *et al.*) achieves Monty Pythonesque heights of blissful misunderstanding. Yet when Aiken wants to make an important point—as in Dr. Wren's speech on the value of pure story—she can be clear and sharp as an icicle.

The level of characterization and the determinedly non-gory deaths in this book at first appear all glossy surface, a bright pantomime. Yet Aiken's story manages to develop a surprising depth. As in William Goldman's *The Princess Bride* (1973), Aiken's deft manipulation of stock villains and heroes and situations resonates with our buried archetypes accrued from childhood reading onward. It is easy to imagine this novel—which benefits also from excellent cover and interior illustrations by Jason Van Hollander—becoming a classic part of the fantasy canon.

The Fluxion of a Fluent

Although Michael Kandel's goofily scintillating, algebraically sizzling *Panda Ray* (St. Martin's, hardcover, $20.95, 219 pages) also features a juvenile protagonist, you might think twice before placing this book into the hands of any pre-adolescent more used to the moral simplicities of Nintendo than, say, the godlike complexities of the *Bhagavadgita*. Doing so might result in a reality-warping jolt direct to the tyke's nervous system from which he or she might never recover.

Like Aiken's book, Kandel's novel mines deep veins of literary riches laid down by epochal writers, smelting the ore into a new classic. I detected spectroanalytic traces of Roald Dahl, Madeleine L'Engle, Eleanor Cameron, Bill Watterson (of *Calvin and Hobbes* fame), Dick, Lem, Zenna Henderson, and Jerome Bixby (specifically, "It's a *Good* Life"). But unlike *Cockatrice*, where the triumph of good and the continuation of certain characters basically unchanged is never in doubt, *Panda Ray* proclaims that the world and indeed one's very mental essence are founded on quicksand, and that sometimes only adherence to a strict set of prohibitions and rituals can insure survival.

Step with Kandel into the Pennsylvania home of the Zimmermans, where a mutant, possibly alien family with weird powers

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and traditions resides. The cast of *3rd Rock from the Sun* looks positively normal contrasted with the Zimmermans: autocratic, nameless Mother, cantankerous, horny Gramps Cesar, flummoxed father Monty, "scooped-out" son Brian, longing-to-be-normal daughter, Kaelin, and rebellious ten-year-old Christopher. Through this youngest member, we are about to embark on an adventure across time and space and possibility, as Chris and Gramps ride their tessellated bathroom Tardis through the Seven Seas of the plenum.

Weaving math and parody (two chapters bear the title "Too Much Science Fiction" one with question mark, one without), nostalgic evocations of everyone's grade school and hyperbolic descriptions of extragalactic cultures into a seamless whole, Kandel succeeds in creating a book at once homey and estranging. In Part Two, where Chris gets to act out the deepest urges of his id while trapped in the Sea of Isn't, events accelerate to Armageddon and beyond.

Panda Ray (the title refers to an enigmatic guru lurking at the core of the cosmos, who helps Chris to achieve realization) is the kind of ontological romp where a major character can die halfway through and be resurrected without detriment to the runaway-train nature of the book. You'd better hop on board now, before you get left behind!

Queen of Your Screams

Did you enjoy the film *Fargo*, directed by the Coen Brothers, those auteurs of the derangement that lies beneath placid surfaces, Midwestern or otherwise? Perhaps you are a fan of the sardonic cinema of John Waters, up to and including his *Serial Mom?* If so, you are fully primed to enjoy David Prill's second novel, *Serial Killer Days* (St. Martin's Press, hardcover, $20.95, 218 pages). Here is a book that gleefully skewers—murderous metaphor fully intentional—any pretensions to normalcy ever held by your average citizen of this great American land.

Prill's first book, *The Unnatural* (1994), reviewed in these pages, was Archie Andrews meets the Addams Family, the story of a plucky youth intent on becoming the world embalming champion. The milieu it postulated was akin to those Pohl-Kornbluth futures where a single industry has come to dominate life. In *Serial Killer Days*, a similar monomania reigns over the culture, but only in one locale and for only a single season. This narrowing of satiric focus does two things. On the one hand, a sense of proportion is achieved: the strange rituals found in Prill's town of Standard Springs, Minnesota, are contrasted with separate environments that know nothing of them. On the other hand, the audacity of *The Unnatural* has been somewhat tempered. This second book is quieter and less wide-ranging, more meditative, if you'll accept such a description after you hear its plot.

The *Mayberry, RFD*-like Stan-

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dard Springs has been haunted for two decades by a serial killer, who takes one victim yearly. Unable to capture the wily, albeit considerate murderer (if your family contributes a victim one year, you're safe forever after, provided you mark your house with a big red X), the authorities have turned lemons into lemonade in the best positive-thinking tradition. The week around the fatal day is now a festival of mortality, Serial Killer Days, featuring amusement rides, a parade, and the Scream Queen contest.

Our protagonist, eighteen-year-old Debbie Sue Morning, is one of the contestants for Queen. She'd be a shoo-in, save for one thing: her screams have something of an artificial quality, since Debbie has never felt actual fear. Prill's book is the story of how Debbie Sue comes to learn, if not precisely fear, then at least disillusionment with everything she has taken for granted. While deftly thrumming several other plot strings, Prill concentrates the bulk of his wordage on Debbie Sue's tale of growing up strange.

Of course, this focus does not negate the tremendous amount of blackly humorous fun Prill also delivers, through the actions, thoughts, words, and beliefs of the Standard Springs townspeople. You've never lived till you've sat through a high-school production of *The Sound of Maniacs,* for instance.

At one point in her journey, Debbie Sue wonders, "Is that what fear is? The not knowing, the idea that everything isn't planned and choreographed, that the possibilities are boundless and that anything can happen to you?"

Well, by this definition, Prill will make you very afraid!

Time now for us to follow a trio of "genre" writers out of the precincts of SF and wherever they choose to lead us.

Love's Not a Game for Three

In *Kink* (Henry Holt, hardcover, $23.00, 278 pages), the place Kathe Koja brings us to is a corner of her patented dark territory of obsession and self-destruction, where a dark and desperate realism is lit by a glimmer of hope and hard-earned self-knowledge. From her earliest works, Koja—like Ian McEwan—has been treading a steady path away from the overtly fantastic, through the hinterlands of Hitchcockian suspense, until now she finally occupies a realm where James M. Cain fuses with Marguerite Duras.

Kink is the story of three lovers, Jess, Sophie, and Lena. The former two are longtime partners whose lives are disrupted by the arrival of the mysterious and glamorous Lena. Like a key in a lock, the second, coldly calculating woman fits herself expertly into the interstices of Jess and Sophie's relationship. Zeroing in on the couple's game-playing air of moral and esthetic superiority (which Lena defines as an admirable thing, "kink . . . [a

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person's] way to see the world"), Lena has soon moved in with Jess and Sophie. The trio now begins to traverse every possible circle of heaven and hell, from initial bliss through mundane adjustments to dramatic flameout and cindered aftermath, whose embers portend some possible recovery.

This novel—in tone, reminiscent of Michael Blumlein's *X, Y.*(1993)—does many things well. Koja crafts a rapturous poetry of the human body, fearlessly limning not only the sex amongst the characters, but also the public moments when a fall of hair or walk across a room conjures up the whole corporeal divinity of a loved one. Portraying modern urban life at its most synthetic and deracinated, Koja's microscopic details and shimmering metaphors create a hothouse atmosphere where the weakest seeds of jealousy and betrayal can grow to jungle dimensions.

The most remarkable feat of storytelling here is the assumption by Koja of the male persona of Jess as first-person (untrustworthy?) narrator. With unfaltering insight into male urges and urgencies (perhaps the *scariest* thing about *Kink*), Koja proves that there are no bars of gender to the imagination. Her book is a *Jules and Jim* for the nineties.

Jesus the Barbarian

How strange, the transformation of a simple notional seed through talent and sweat into a complex finished work! The same initial idea or impulse, filtered through individual sensibilities, can emerge from different writers as totally opposed creations. And yet, pierced to the quick, two seemingly unlike books can bleed the same life-giving fluids.

Earlier I mentioned Delany's Nevèrÿon series, which owes an obvious debt to sword-and-sorcery, most clearly Howard's Conan. The desire to stage thrilling adventures in an exotic, "simpler" past—when the trappings of modern civilization were less weighty, when answers could be found at the tip of a sword, when the roots of our present culture were still exposed and growing, when virtues and vices appeared in vivid shapes—this impulse has now given rise to another fine book which at first seems as far from Conan's hackings and hewings as possible. Paul Park's *The Gospel of Corax* (Soho Press, hardcover, $25.00, 297 pages) is the first-person tale of one Corax, runaway slave in the early decades of the Christian era, who just happens to find his fate entangled with a certain Jewish rebel-*cum*-seeker named Jeshua of Nazareth. Somber and hypnotic, a blend of the mystical and the earthy, as alien as if set on another planet, *Gospel* is written at a majestic peak of talent that poor Howard could only dimly aspire to in his dreams. And yet, consider two separated passages from *Gospel,* both featuring Jeshua of Nazareth:

"The red light fell on one side of his face. It showed his big nose, his thick beard, his big, deep-sunken eyes. . . . One of the seams had

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opened over his shoulder, and I could see his enormous arm, his dark, bulging shoulder that protruded from the rent." And: "He had seized hold of a man who had come too close to him, and twisted the bronze boathook from his fist. Then as I watched he leapt back, and with an immense double-handed stroke of the boathook he laid a man out flat upon the sand."

Jesus or Conan? The call is yours, although with a book that lambastes the fatal flaws of duality, perhaps we should reply "both, yet neither."

In Gene Wolfean language that is simultaneously simple yet rich (is "Biblical" the adjective I'm searching for?), Park performs several amazing feats. First, he delivers a portrait of Roman Imperial times as thickly convincing as, say, de Camp's *An Elephant for Aristotle* (1958), a portrait that shows a world as syncretic and baffling as any postmodern notion of culture. Second, he incarnates spiritual issues in solid physical shapes, using character and events to delineate paths that all souls must choose among. And finally, Park manages to make the fate of a relative nobody, Corax, as crucial and interesting as that of his big dumb historical buddy, Jesus—all without turning his book into *Monty Python's Life of Brian*.

Corax is the young, Empire-born son of a soldier from India enslaved in battle. Wise, talented, yet confused and venal, he is as deep a character as you will encounter in any fiction. Killing his master, he sets out to reach the mythic land of his ancestors. His journey across Asia Minor involves treachery and brutality, boredom and terror of a kind utterly absent from modern life—except of course in such common catastrophes as Bosnia and Rwanda. Through Boschian situations—some of them eerily paralleling the sayings and doings of the more familiar Jesus—Corax and Jeshua strive steadily eastward, hoping to find solace and redemption in the numinous grace of Lord Boddo, also once known as Siddhartha.

Like an amalgam of Fellini's *Satyricon* and Jarmusch's *Dead Man, The Gospel of Corax* details a captivating bardo passage all of us should be so fortunate to make.

What the Waterdog Brought

Is every historical fiction set in Victorian/Edwardian times and written by a fantasist necessarily steampunk? Of course not. A certain tone and subject matter are necessary. For attitude, one expects a kind of wiseass serious levity; for subject, a concentration on Rube Goldberg tech and multistrata societal interplay. Characterization and plot will probably tend toward the absurd. At least, this seems how the few practitioners of steampunk have been inclined to attack things up till now.

By this hastily cobbled-together set of defining characteristics, Sarah Smith's *The Knowledge of Water* (Ballantine, hardcover, $23.00, 469 pages) is not steampunk, despite Smith's prior work

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as a fantasist. Instead, what the book delivers is a rich and sumptuous historical tale more in the Jamesian mode, effectively mated with a Thomas Harris-style thriller, with sufficient scientific-sociological hooks integrally inserted so as to snag the lucky reader of SF who might otherwise miss this thrilling feast.

In the Paris of 1910, neurologist Alexander von Reisden, our hero, a fellow old beyond his years, carrying significant emotional baggage, falls in and out of love with the charming and talented Perdita Halley, whose career as a concert pianist flies in the face of convention (providing Smith with a continuous feminist subtext). Bohemians flit about, hatching mad plans to steal the Mona Lisa from the Louvre. An art forger is launching timebomb paintings into the marketplace. An American detective, friend to Reisden, bumbles about like a derbied Columbo. And a whore's killer plots his next murder.

Looming over and embedding these people and their actions is the City of Light Herself, which in Smith's capable hands is as much of a character as the humans. As Paris is threatened by historic floods, Smith manages to turn infrastructure into drama, and it is this examination of how urban life works—along with Reisden's scientific viewpoint—that lends this book its share of stefnal feeling.

Cleverly layering image upon image of water, using the symbol of a child's pet dog as a key to innocence and affirmation of life, drawing grand equations between art, forgery, and self-representation, Smith tells a timeless story which nonetheless evokes a whole era with the clarity of a Merchant-Ivory production.

Gaudy Dooms

In Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium is the Massage* (1967), that prescient Bible of the cyberdecades we now find ourselves surfing through, British mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead is quoted as saying, "The major advances in civilization are processes that all but wreck the societies in which they occur." Here now to gleefully illustrate that thesis are two of the finest hard SF writers of their generation, Paul McAuley and Greg Egan.

McAuley's *Fairyland* (AvoNova, trade, $12.50, 368 pages), an award-winner in its 1995 English edition, represents a change in venue and style from such earlier McAuley works as *Eternal Light* (1991) and *Red Dust* (1993). For the first time, McAuley stays anchored to an Earthbound near-future. And his characteristic information-rich prose, while still mind-bending, has been skimmed of all fat, conducing toward a lean, crackling narrative that reminds me a bit of Bruce Sterling's commanding storytelling style.

In McAuley's world, bio- and nanohackers ride the cutting-edge of tech, leaving merely digital Web cowboys in the dust. Amoral, care-

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less, often stoked up on their own products to the point of recklessness, they are goading human society down a path that leads right to a precipitous cliff. Our hero is one such, the hapless Alex Sharkey. Fat, balding, something of a mama's boy, he is hardly your standard mirror-shaded cyberpunk cliché. A B-list genius, he is content to subsist on profits from minor-league drug designing. But then he has the heady misfortune to run into an artificially boosted child prodigy named Milena. Driven solely by selfish interests, Milena has a plan to transform the gengineered pseudohuman slaves called dolls into something quite different: fairies, in fact, with herself their Titania and Alex her Merlin. (Unlike Richard Calder's long-legged sexy dolls, McAuley's creations are blue, short, and generally trollish, more utilitarian than decorative.)

Part One economically and smoothly imparts all this to us, while also providing plenty of action that culminates in the first doll-to-fairy conversion. Part Two opens twelve years later, with the fairies well established across the globe. Part Three details a kind of secret Armageddon between humans and fairies that, amazingly, works out pretty well for both parties—at least for any survivors left alive and clambering from the wreckage.

McAuley does a lot in this novel. He fuses mythic motifs with technology in a way adumbrated at the start of the cyberpunk movement, in Vernor Vinge's *True Names* (1981). He juggles daring speculations in such areas as finance, a-life, nanotech, warfare, and politics like the Flying Karamazov Brothers juggling chainsaws. He launches droll satirical missiles at pop culture (the major fairy infestation in Europe, for instance, centers in the abandoned Eurodisney enclave). And he convincingly portrays the transformation of Alex from a shirker and slacker to someone willing to risk his life to help heal the disease he's unleashed.

As with any thriller relying on its share of MacGuffins, there are occasional holes and implausibilities. Ejected from England without a penny, Alex never seems to lack money. And would a hardened charity doctor named Morag Gray, who has seen thousands of innocents die during her ministrations, really upset her whole life over one unknown child stolen by the fairies? Still, the plot moves at such supersonic speeds, introducing new marvels on every page, that any minor refts in the fabric are soon forgotten.

One curious ancestor for this book, it occurred to me, is Karel Capek's *War With the Newts* (1937). This early SF classic seems in the air these days, with such books as John Barnes's *Kaliedoscope Century* (1995) and Kathleen Goonan's *Queen City Jazz* (1994) also showing a society at war with—or already conquered by—its own artificial offspring. Is this a manifestation of a collective sub-

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conscious fear of our progeny, an argument for infanticide, a shiver occasioned by the hot breath of our replacements on our necks? Ask me again in fifty years!

Greg Egan's *Distress* (Millennium, hardcover, £16.99, 343 pages) is the final volume in what he refers to as his "subjective cosmology" trilogy, whose previous entries were *Quarantine* (1992) and *Permutation City* (1994). In one way, *Distress* reads more simply than those two masterpieces, almost like an extended version of one of Egan's short stories, in the sense that the novel's time frame, locales and characters are all quite deliberately restricted. Yet this is far from a case of a cheating author bloating out a minor conception to undeserved lengths. Not only does Egan satisfyingly convey to us a substantial portion of his fascinating offstage Earth of 2055, but, as was only to be expected from such a philosophy-driven writer, he also provides a bounty of weird cerebration embodied in the lives and loves of his characters, culminating in massive ontological upsets. In the ultimate analysis, then, *Distress* rounds out the trilogy in bravura fashion.

Told in the first person (which gives the book an immediacy different from the sometimes lofty perspective of *Fairyland*), *Distress* unrolls the story of how Andrew Worth, hardwired science reporter for the on-line service SeeNet, finds his latest, seemingly simple assignment swelling to cosmic proportions. Worth, thirtyish and work-obsessed, is a massive failure in the arena of human relationships. We watch with a mix of sympathy and shared condemnation as his latest partner deserts him on grounds of emotional obtuseness, just short of Worth's eighteen-month record for an affair. Throwing himself deeper into his reportage for SeeNet (Worth carries onboard gadgetry that allows for recording through his own senses), he angles for the assignment of covering a conference of physicists in search of the Theory of Everything, or TOE. The leading candidate for success at this seminar—which is being held at Stateless, a rogue nation of anarchists, artificially-constructed in mid-ocean—is an African woman named Violet Mosala. As Worth begins to research the issues centering around Mosala and her theory, he finds himself swept up in a conspiracy bent on using the TOE to change the very substratum of reality. How Worth becomes the pivot of their desperate machinations dovetails neatly with his very lack of emotional resonance.

Egan's brand of hard SF is unique in its blending of scientific concerns with hot-button emotional issues. From the very first scene, in which a dead man speaks, to the scene toward the end of the book when Worth decides to unburden himself of his recording apparatus in a literally visceral moment, Egan always manages to provoke involuntary grunts of astonishment from the reader as well as reflective mur-

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murs of satisfaction. Two topics that run throughout the novel—gender wars and science-bashing—are both likely to garner strong reactions from readers. Aside from a general distrust of cant, Egan plays fair with both sides of each issue.

The citation of several earlier SF novels might convey the exciting blend that Egan offers with *Distress*. As in Bear's *Anvil of Stars* (1992), informational mechanics is the neglected science explored here. Ballard's *The Day of Creation* (1987), which also featured a science-journalist in doubt of the value of popular educational shows, figures too. (Sometimes, especially in snatches of subtly off-kilter dialogue, Egan sounds like Ballard as translated by Feynmann.) The peaceful anarchy of Stateless recalls Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1975). Most crucially, the battling paradigms featured in so much of Charles Harness's work have here been reinvigorated with updated logic and coherence.

The title of an aborted documentary that Worth was once scheduled to produce, before he was caught in the snares of quantum physics, was *Distress,* and it was to deal with a strange psychosis bubbling beneath the surface of his world. Turning his back on this fearful syndrome, Worth inescapably finds himself facing it from a different angle. Self-reflexively, Egan's meta-*Distress* is both the report Worth never produced and its much larger commentary. ●

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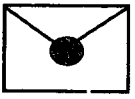

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NEXT ISSUE

MAY, COVER STORY

Bill Johnson makes his *Asimov's* debut next issue with our fast-paced May cover story, in which an alien Ambassador from the stars and his human bodyguard, on the run from hostile forces, leave the dangerous streets of Washington, D.C., behind and go to someplace *really* alien: Summit, South Dakota . . . for an entertaining, eccentric, and pleasantly offbeat study of the value of family ties that may well broaden your definition of "family," in "We Will Drink a Fish Together."

HIGH-QUALITY WRITERS

British writer **Stephen Baxter**, who's been making quite a stir in the last few years with his daring and wildly inventive hard science stories, returns with a story that's cosmic in scope even by *his* standards, as a dangerous and forbidden experiment that could change the destiny of the entire Universe gets under way in "Soliton Star"; new writer **James Sarafin** treats us to a thrilling game of Cat and Mouse in which the cats are very big, very fast, very deadly, and very smart, and humans are the mice, in the suspenseful "In the Furnace of the Night"; acclaimed British writer **Brian W. Aldiss** explores "The Enigma of the Three Moons"; **Esther M. Friesner**, whose last story for us, "Death and the Librarian," won her a Nebula award in 1996, returns with a chilling portrait of just what it means to be "Prey"; National Book Award-winner **Lisa Goldstein** gives us a wry and sprightly look at the intricate ins-and-outs of "Fortune and Misfortune"; and new writer **Cynthia Ward**, making her *Asimov's* debut, takes us to a distant planet to show us some of the troubling events that will change a young boy's life forever, all taking place "On the Last Day of School."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column takes a close look at "The Handprints on the Wall"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features.

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SF Conventional Calendar

Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 13107B Autumn Wood Way, Fairfax VA 22033. The hot line is (703) 449-1276. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons) leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with a musical keyboard. — Erwin S. Strauss

FEBRUARY 1997

28-Mar. 2—**AstronomiCon.** For info, write: **Box 1701, Rochester NY 14603.** Or phone: **(716) 342-4697** (10AM to 10PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Rochester NY (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Radisson. Guests will include: T. Huff, S. Van Camp, Jay Kay Klein, R. J. Sawyer, Dr. D. Stephenson, J. A. Price.

28-Mar. 2—**SheVaCon. (540) 885-5530.** Ingleside Resort, Staunton VA. M. Weis, Ruth Thompson, Rikk Jacobs.

28-Mar. 2—**Potlatch. (206) 634-3828.** University Plaza Hotel, Seattle WA. Low-key, with written-SF emphasis.

28-Mar. 2—**ConCave. (423) 239-3106.** Park Mammoth Resort, Park City KY. Toni Weisskopf. Also low-key.

28-Mar. 2—**AgamemCon. (714) 643-8352.** Holiday Inn Bristol Plaza, Costa Mesa CA. Babylon 5 meet.

MARCH 1997

7-9—**LunaCon.** Hilton, Rye Brook NY. C. J. Cherryh, David Cherry, Michael O'Hare, Michael Walsh.

7-9—**ConChord. (714) 530-3546.** Airtel, Van Nuys CA. Graham Leathers, Larry Warner. SF/fantasy folksinging.

7-9—**KatsuCon.** Holiday Inn Executive Center, Virginia Beach VA. S. Bennett, R. DeJesus, P. Varga. Anime.

7-9—**SF Days. (+49 [0] 231) 400-664.** Harenberg Civic Center, Dortmund, Germany.

7-9—**SF Comedy Con. (01) 825-0811.** Parnell Square, Dublin, Ireland. Robert Llewellyn, Dave Lucas, David Prowse.

14-16—**RevelCon, Box 980744, Houston TX 77098. (713) 526-5625.** For fans of Star Trek and other media SF.

14-16—**ConAmazoo, Box 1546, Evanston IL 60204. (708) 328-8765.** Stouffers, Battle Creek MI. W. Wardrop, Nerat.

14-16—**Corflu, 2305 Bernard Ave., Nashville TN 37212. (615) 383-5763.** Lighthouse Hotel, Pacifica CA. Fanzines.

20-23—**CoastCon, Box 1423, Biloxi MS 39533. (601) 435-5217.** Broadwater East. Freas, Schiavo, Mojo.

21-23—**MidSouthCon, Box 11446, Memphis TN 38111. (901) 274-7355.** Sam's, Tunica MS. J. deChancie, P. Darrow.

21-23—**AggieCon, MSC Box J-1, College Station TX 77844. (409) 845-1515.** A&M campus. Stelfreeze, Cupp, Soto.

21-23—**ConEstoga, Box 54037, Tulsa OK 74155.** Airport Radisson, Tulsa OK. George Alec Effinger, Barb Hambly

21-23—**MillenniCon, 143 Schloss Lane, Dayton OH 45418. (513) 933-0452.** Blue Ash Hotel, Cincinnati OH. Thomley.

SEPTEMBER 1999

2-6—***AussieCon 3, Box 266, Prospect Heights IL 60070.*** *Melbourne, Australia. The 1999 World SF Con.*

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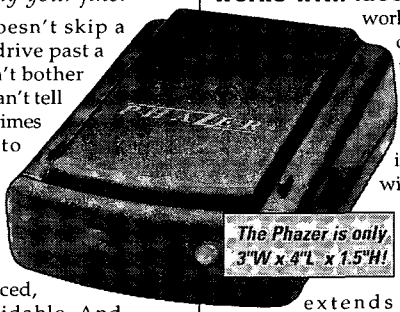
TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

How to make your car invisible to radar and laser...*legally!*

Rocky Mountain Radar introduces a device guaranteed to make your car electronically "invisible" to speed traps—if you get a ticket while using the product, the manufacturer will pay your fine!



■ *The Phazer will "jam" both radar and laser guns, preventing police from measuring your speed.*

If your heart doesn't skip a beat when you drive past a speed trap, don't bother reading this. I can't tell you how many times it's happened to me, even if I wasn't speeding.

It seems with speed-detection technology getting more advanced, tickets are almost unavoidable. And although devices exist that enable motorists to detect these speed traps, they are outlawed in many states...including mine.

The solution. Today, Rocky Mountain Radar offers a solution—the Phazer. Combining a *passive* radar scrambler with an *active* laser scrambler, it makes your automobile electronically "invisible" to police speed-detecting equipment.

■ Radar with FM "chirp"
■ Police radar

■ Special infrared with "noise"
■ Police laser

HOW TO MAKE YOUR CAR DISAPPEAR

Radar and laser scramblers are devices that foil speed traps by making vehicles electronically "invisible" to police radar. Radar and laser scramblers mix a portion of the signal with background clutter and reflect it back to the squad car. This technique creates an unreadable signal that confuses the computer inside the radar gun.

■ *The Phazer makes your car invisible to police radar and lasers or the manufacturer will pay your speeding ticket!*

How it scrambles radar. Police radar takes five to 10 measurements of a vehicle's speed in about one second. By mixing an X, K or Ka radar signal with an FM "chirp," the Phazer sends one signal that tells the radar the car is going 15 m.p.h. and another signal that the car is going 312 m.p.h. Because police radar can't verify the speed, it displays no speed at all.

Works with laser, too! The Phazer also works against Lidar that use the change in distance over time to detect a vehicle's speed. The Phazer uses light-emitting diodes (LEDs) to fire invisible infrared pulses through the windshield. This gives a false indication of the car's distance, blocking measurement of your speed. Its range of effectiveness extends from as far as three miles to almost 100 feet away from the trap.

Ticket rebate program. Rocky Mountain Radar is so confident that the Phazer will work that if you do get a speeding ticket within the first year while using the Phazer, they will pay your fine if the speed limit was not exceeded by more than 30%, or 15 miles per hour, whichever is less.

Risk-free. Try the Phazer. It's backed by our risk-free trial and three-year manufacturer's warranty. If you're not satisfied, return it within 90 days for a "No Questions Asked" refund. Best of all, unless you live in Minnesota, Oklahoma or Washington, D.C., using the Phazer is completely within your legal rights.

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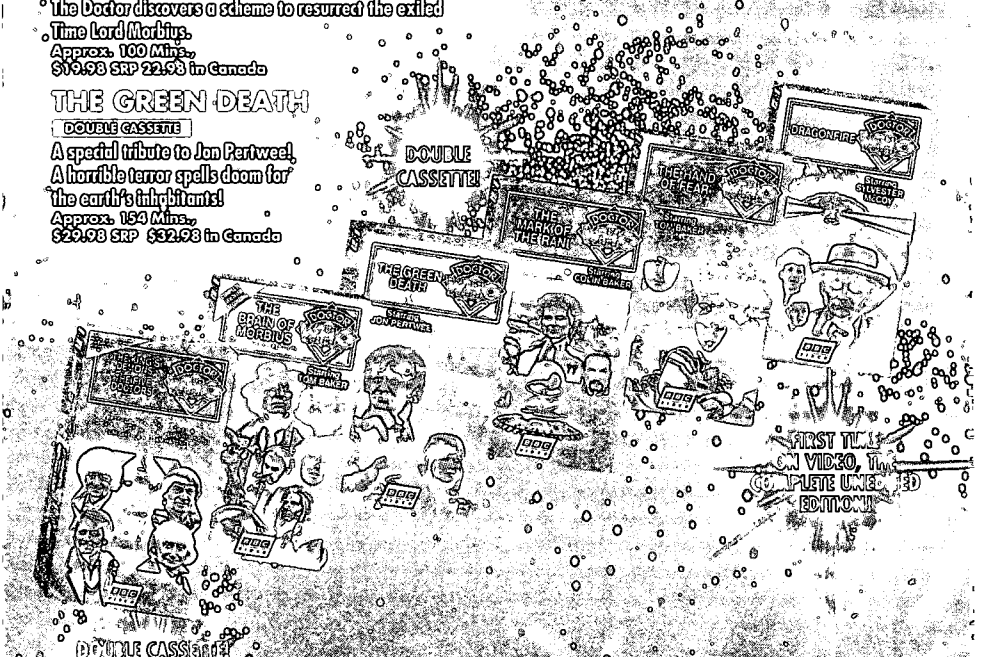

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